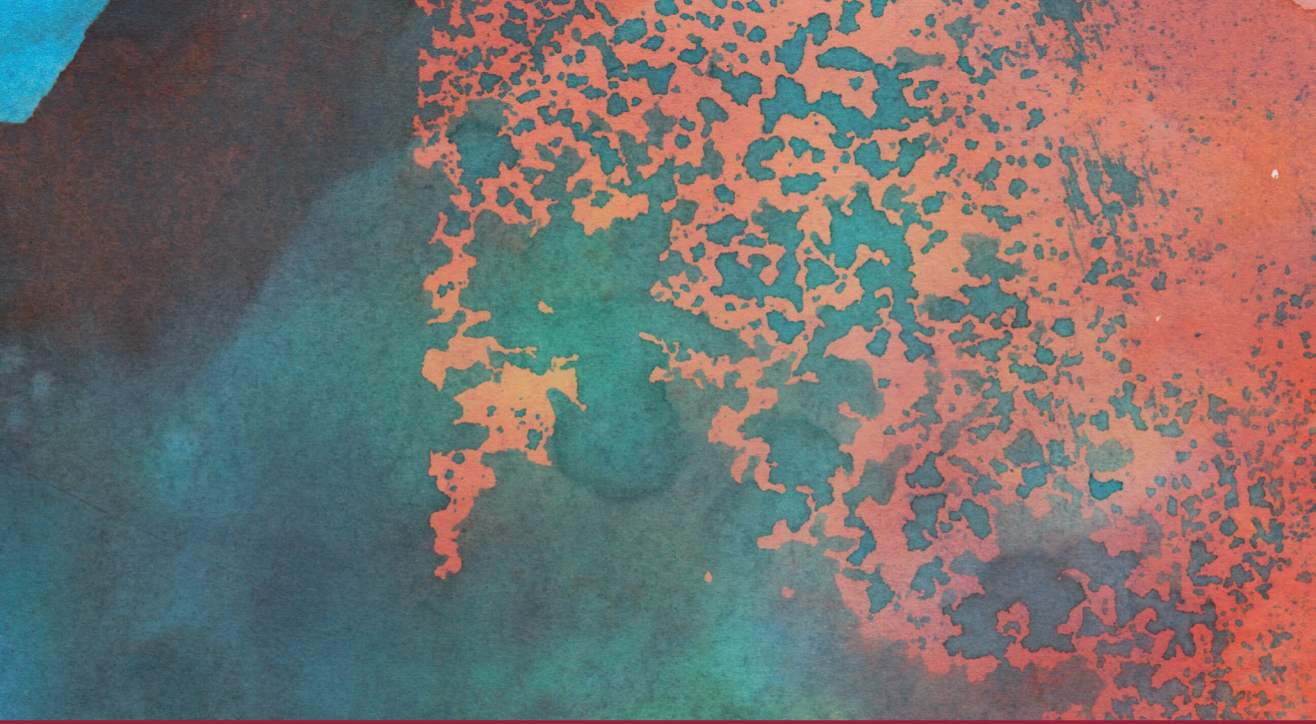

Political Violence

TERRORIST RECRUITMENT, PROPAGANDA AND BRANDING

SELLING TERROR ONLINE

Anna Kruglova

Terrorist Recruitment, Propaganda and Branding

This book analyses the marketing techniques that terrorist organisations employ to encourage people to adopt their ideology and become devoted supporters.

The book's central thesis is that due to the development of digital technologies and social media, terrorist groups are employing innovative marketing techniques and advertising strategies to foster an emotional connection with their audiences, particularly those in younger demographics. By conducting thematic and narrative analyses of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) propagandist magazines, as well as looking at the group's online communities, the book demonstrates that terrorist groups behave as commercial brands by establishing an emotional connection with their potential recruits. Specifically, groups and their potential supporters follow the logic of emotional choice. The book emphasizes that, while ISIS became the first group that discovered and benefited from the power of marketing, it did not have a supernatural power and thus it is possible to find a response to it, which is particularly important now. The book eventually poses a question about whether terrorism has become the product of marketing in the same way as any mainstream consumer product is and asks what can we do to battle the appeal of marketing-savvy terrorist groups.

This book will be of interest to students of terrorism studies, radicalisation, and propaganda, communication, and security studies.

Anna Kruglova is a Lecturer of Terrorism Studies at the School of Arts and Media at the University of Salford and has a PhD in international studies from Queen's University Belfast.

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Selling Terror Online

Anna Kruglova

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Abbreviations

BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CTS	critical terrorism studies
CV	curriculum vitae
Daesh	a derogatory Arabic term for ISIS
EU	European Union
ICSR	International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation
IS	Islamic State
ISIL	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
MP	Member of Parliament
MCB	Muslim Council of Britain
MWNUK	Muslim Women's Network for the UK
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OCD	obsessive-compulsive disorder
OPC	organised persuasive communication
OTS	orthodox terrorism studies
PHD	doctor of philosophy
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London
SMT	social movement theory
UMO	Union of Muslim Organisations
UK	United Kingdom
U.S.	United States

Glossary

akhiran	afterlife
al-wala al-bara	"loyalty and disavowal", a jihadist concept meaning that one must be unflinchingly loyal to Islam and unflinchingly opposed to all things and activities associated with disbelief
barakah	divine energy
bay'a	allegiance
biradari	a clan-based network in Pakistani Muslim communities
burqa	Islamic female clothing that covers the whole body
dar-al-Islam	"the land of Islam"
dar-al-Kufr	"the land of disbelief"
dawa	proselytisation
dhimmi	non-Muslims living in an Islamic state
dhulm	tyranny
dua	a prayer containing a specific request
dunya	earthly life
emir	1. an independent ruler or chieftain; 2. a military commander or governor
fisq	an act of violation of Islamic law
fitna	an act of falling into sin
ghanima	war booty
gheera	protective jealousy
hajr	legal disability
haqq	truth
hijab	Islamic headscarf
hijrah	in ISIS's interpretation, migration to the Caliphate
ijma	consensus
Jannah	Paradise
jahilya	state of ignorance (refers to the times when people did not know Islam)
jihad	in ISIS's interpretation, war against disbelievers
imam	Islamic leader
jiziya	a tax paid by non-Muslims in an Islamic state
Khalifah	Caliph

khilafah	Caliphate
kuffar	disbelievers
kufr	an act of disbelief
lā ilāha illallāh	"there is no God but God", Islamic statement of faith
maqdūr 'alayhim	under the power of Muslims
mujahid (pl. mujahideen)	a person who engages in jihad
munafiq	hypocrite, someone who claims to follow Islam but in reality, does not
murtad	apostate, a person who left Islam
mushrik	polytheist
muwahid	monotheist
niqab	face veil that leaves eyes uncovered
qisas	retribution
rafida	a derogatory term for Shi'a Muslims, "rejectionist"
rahimahullāh	"God have mercy upon him"
shahada	manifestation of faith
shahid	martyr, a person who died for the sake of Islam
shaytan	devil
Sharia	a body of religious law that forms part of the Islamic tradition
shirk	polytheism
sura	a chapter in the Qur'an
taghut	an act of worshipping something other than God (idols)
takfir	proclaiming that someone is not Muslim anymore
taqiyah	Muslim male skullcap, often worn for religious purposes
tawhid	the oneness of God, monotheism
ummah	the global community of Muslims
wudhu	a ritual of cleansing yourself before prayer
Yazidi	Kurdish religious minority primarily living in the north of Iraq, southern Turkey, north of Syria and in some areas of the Caucasus and Iran
zakat	giving money for charity, one of the five pillars of Islam

Introduction

Terrorism,[1] Propaganda, and Branding: The (In)Visible Connection

Why do some groups resort to terrorist violence? And how and why do people become terrorists? How come that a boy or a girl next door that you used to go to school together years later becomes a member of a notorious group, involved in killing and kidnapping of people, and other notorious crimes? What happens in the minds of the people that transforms their worldviews and themselves?

Social studies scholars ranging from psychologists, criminologists and political scientists (whom we call "terrorism experts") have tried to answer these questions for years. And there was a considerable success achieved in this area.

Thus, with some rare exceptions,[2] scholars now agree that terrorism has a strategic nature. This means that terrorist groups usually resort to violence because they want to achieve certain goals – for example, attention (publicity for their cause); acknowledgement (sympathy for their cause), recognition (acceptance of the justification of their cause), authority (which would allow terrorists to influence the government and achieve changes), and governance (achievement of full control over a state).[3] These clearly social and political demands do not come from vacuum but from a set of established frustrations and grievances that are caused by the problems that exist in a state (such as lack of political participation, weak government, political repression, and poverty).[4] However, evidence suggests that while these factors may play a certain role, they do not necessarily lead to terrorism,[5] since even in places like the Middle East or Africa, where these grievance can be particularly acute, only a small percentage of people actually resort to terrorism. In the last 20 years, the scholarly attention shifted from the "root causes" to the actual perpetrators of violence and started questioning their motivations to using it directly. That is, when the concept of radicalisation came to be known and became a dominating narrative in research on terrorism. One of the definitions of radicalisations is "the changes in attitude that lead towards sanctioning and, ultimately, the involvement in the use of violence for a political aim".[6] Within this framework, we have a wide variety of explanations that highlight the main motivations and factors that lead people to violence. Among those, the desire to belong to a group and form meaningful social connections,[7] satisfying some psychological needs (for example, a life crisis

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may trigger "cognitive opening" that would make a person more susceptible to propaganda[8] – for example, systematic discrimination made some young Muslims in the West search for answers in radical Islam[9] – or a loss of a significant other that triggers a desire for revenge[10]), a connection with someone who is already in the group,[11] or a persistent feeling of injustice that is impossible to change in any other way.[12] It can also be a simple personality issue: some people join because they look for an adventure or seek to shape their identity.[13]

All these explanations may be different in their perspectives and research angles but are united by two things. First, there is no single pathway towards terrorism, each life story or experience while might bare certain similarities is, nevertheless, is unique. Second, all these perspectives emphasise that radicalisation is a gradual process of change in a person's mindset and perspectives. Consequently, it is implied that since the process is happening gradually, it is possible to depict signs of it (like those mentioned above) at an early stage and thus prevent it. This idea became the foundation for many counter-terrorist approaches in the world, such as UK's Prevent programme.

While I totally agree with the first argument, the second idea might be less convincing. If the process of radicalisation is truly gradual and has certain patterns, why is it so difficult to predict terrorism? And doesn't an idea of pre-existing factors making people more prone towards radicalisation essentially result in the existence of practices that make people suspicious of each other? An example of this can be "Prevent Duty", which is a framework imposed on health, education, and social workers as well as ordinary citizens to report a person whom they suspect may be radicalised. The criteria used to identify whether a person is in danger are quite vague and subjective, for example: "withdrawal from usual activities, expressing anger, using inappropriate language, expressing support for extremist ideologies".[14] There is a possibility of a very wide understanding of what radicalisation is, and, therefore, the possibility of a very large number of cases in which people may be referred to deradicalisation programmes without any legitimate reason. One of the examples of this was when a four-year-old child was referred after he drew a picture in which his father was presumably making a bomb. In reality, the father was just cutting a cucumber and the "device" in his hands was a cooking knife.[15]

Cases like this, enhanced surveillance practices used against Muslims and the overall discourse of "them" being more dangerous than "us" (which prevent willingly or unwillingly incorporated into the life of the society) increase the feeling of paranoia and mutual distrust among people. In addition, the practices used by it are highly discriminatory and can potentially contribute to the frustration and disappointment of people in their government, "becoming a more significant source of grievances in affected communities than the police and ministerial powers".[16] I am surely not a pioneer in having these concerns regarding the usefulness of the concept of radicalisation. This scepticism is shared by scholars as John Horgan, Randy Borum,

Andrew Hoskins, and Ben O'Loughlin.[17] They argue that holding extremist beliefs does not necessarily lead to violence, which is implied in the process of radicalisation. And indeed, in daily life – real or virtual – we can encounter many examples of individuals who openly call for violence, support violence but never actually engage in violence themselves. One of the recent examples is a group newly designated as terrorist by the United States and Canada, called the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM). While on its social media it does not shy away from calls to physically eliminate gay people or migrants, none of their members has ever been involved in any kind of direct violence against these population group or known for organising a terrorist attack.[18] In this case, how would the Russian government have to evaluate the threat coming from this group? Shall it follow the U.S. example, and recognise them as terrorists as a precautionary measure and consequently start taking steps to diminish the group's capability to make real harm as well as diminish its influence on its target audience? But most of these same people calling for killings of gays are in fact just regular citizens going to work and raising kids without any far-reaching plans for violence. In this case, would connecting their radicalisation with their potential for violence actually encourage them for it? Apparently, there have been cases when people were pushed towards violent acts by those who were meant to prevent them from it. One of the illustrative examples is the infamous "Jihadi John" or Mohammed Emwazi, an Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) executioner from Britain. Before he became a member, he was repeatedly followed and interrogated by MI5 as a potential terrorist; however, he has never been accused of anything concrete. This pursuit negatively affected the life of Emwazi, ruining two of his attempted marriages and plans to move to Kuwait, where he hoped to settle in.[19] These actions of MI5 may not have directly pushed him towards his decision to join ISIS but definitely contributed to it. In this case, can it be that the idea of radicalisation (or at least its practical expression) may do more harm than good?

The emergence of ISIS in 2014, to an extent, became a reason to question again what we know about terrorism, radicalisation, and how terrorist groups facilitate people's transition from holding radical beliefs to committing violent acts. At first glance, the group demonstrated the patterns and observations discovered by scholars previously and has become an illustrative knowledge to the patterns that have already been observed and explained by scholars.

First, it is true that for ISIS followers in the Middle East, the theory of root causes is applicable. Indeed, when one examines the motivations of people in the Middle East who joined ISIS, for many of them, the reason was the existing desperate situation in their country and in the region.[20] A lot of people would also talk about the devastating situation they found their countries in after the breakout of the Syrian civil war – poverty, human rights abuses by the Assad regime, the overall feeling of helplessness and powerlessness – all of which would eventually bring people to ISIS. Some of these motivations also apply to foreign fighters. For example, among 850 British citizens who

have been confirmed to travel to Syria,[21] a significant number came from a disadvantaged social environment.[22]

Moreover, if we look at the situation in the Middle East, it was true that the population's strong dissatisfaction with the local authorities helped ISIS achieve significant success. ISIS managed to become a reliable service provider to the local population, for example, reducing the crime rate, providing food, and disposing of rubbish from the city. This eventually made some parts of the local population accept the group as a "lesser evil" than the Syrian authorities.[23] At certain period of its existence, it would be fair to say that ISIS hardly differed much from a real state in terms of its paperwork and indeed showed certain successes in governing the territories it captured.[24] In addition, there is a strong apocalyptic discourse in ISIS's ideology that lets the group win the sympathies of its audience in the Middle East. Protracted and brutal wars that have been tearing the region apart for years made the local population ready to believe in a prophecy of the return of Mahdi – a righteous ruler who will be sent by God before the apocalypse to build the Caliphate.[25] The obligation of all Muslims is to obey and assist him in that – an idea that ISIS successfully used in its propaganda.[26]

While religion does play an important role, there are two things to take into account. First, as has been mentioned, people are driven to radical Islam and eventually to a terrorist group supporting radical ideas because they use is it as a gateway to escape from problems and grievances they have in real life. Second, some of ISIS's followers may not be interested in religion that much at all. One of the examples, which became iconic, is a story about some ISIS recruits ordering *Islam for Dummies* and *Koran for Dummies* before going to Syria,[27] which clearly demonstrates the level of their commitment to spiritual aspects of life.

Finally, when it comes to Western pro-ISIS fighters, one can find such motivations as the outrage and the desire for revenge for the sufferings of the Syrians and the discrimination of Muslims in the West for ISIS supporters.[28] At the same time, the dynamics among Western ISIS supporters shows that psychological motivations highlighted by the social networks theory scholars were also present. The flag, the uniform, and online communities where ISIS followers could socialise, and calls to come and join their true "brothers and sisters" demonstrate the role of social connections and the desire of belonging as another factor in the success of ISIS recruitment. There were also individuals who were not motivated by political or religious issues; rather, they were looking for their own "identity, community, power and a feeling of masculinity". Neumann writes that, for them, "being a fighter is the adventure of their lives and at the same time an answer to their search of the 'self' ".[29]

Despite everything that has been just said, ISIS brought some innovations (especially in propaganda) that have proven to be effective and thus are likely to be further replicated and developed by the group's predecessors and those are not necessarily only jihadists.

The first thing that single out this group is that it did not just attract domestic fighters to commit attacks in the Middle East and in the West, as had happened with Al Qaeda, for example. It essentially became the first group to *massively*[30] attract foreign fighters from Europe (several thousand jihadists travelled to Syria to join ISIS). While Al Qaeda, in the earlier period of its existence, also had tens of thousands of fighters, not to mention commanders,[31] nevertheless, European foreign fighters were a much rarer phenomenon in that organisation compared to ISIS. According to Neumann, the emergence of ISIS in 2014 marked the opening of a new era in the history of terrorism.[32]

Why did this happen? Yes, people joined terrorist groups before and yes, the numbers may have been high, but with ISIS it also reminded a pop-group suddenly hitting all the charts and creating a mass craze. A lot of research connects this phenomenon with ISIS's use of social media. The group actively used all available platforms, from Twitter to Instagram and Skype, to spread its content. Moreover, the group seems to have real social media professionals, who express a lot of creativity not only in what they post but also in how they post it. One of the most vivid examples is the hijacking of popular hashtags, which made the group's posts visible to a large number of users.[33] They also explored various formats of content presentation, which was not typical for its predecessors, such as memes, apps for learning Arabic and even video games.[34] In addition, ISIS created a full-fledged digital army of hackers, who would launch attacks on its enemies' information systems and inflict serious damage.[35] Moreover, there was a clear strategy behind the content of the group's online propaganda. Thus, according to Harroro Ingram, ISIS portrayed itself as the legitimate representative of one particular group, Sunni Muslims, and would attempt (successfully) to spark hatred towards other groups. ISIS would also appeal to the problems that its target audience considered relevant[36] (such as Islamophobia in Europe[37] or the situation in the Middle East), at the same time combining these negative messages with more positive ones (e.g. about the happy life in the Caliphate). The group's propaganda was "designed to shape its readership's perceptions, polarise their support and drive their radicalisation".[38] In addition to that, the group came up with positive messages. It offered a utopian idea of a perfect state in which everyone can live happily and in justice, and dedicate their lives to serving Allah. This idea fascinated many ISIS recruits, who were not only frustrated with their life in Europe but also wanted a more meaningful and pious life.[39]

On the one hand, all this explains the logic of ISIS's propaganda and what message it was sending out. On the other hand, this argument is more convincing in explaining the motivations of people who were unhappy and unsatisfied with their lives, or those who were very concerned (or became concerned) with the tragedy in Syria, or those who experienced cases of discrimination. Surely, for some people, it was definitely true and their live stories would indeed go along the accepted radicalisation narrative when there was a reason that eventually led a person to a group. At the same time, there were of examples where

people (particularly young people) would not have any interest in radical Islam and no interest in Syria, but were well-fit in society and generally happy with their lives.[40] They would be the least likely candidates to fall for an idea to jeopardise their future and comfortable life and change them for a possible death in Syria or a possible arrest. The questions then arise: how did ISIS convince people without any previous radical beliefs? How did it make them change their perspective and most importantly become their passionate supporters? And how come this was happening despite the fact that ISIS's terrible crimes were shown publicly not only by media but by the group itself?

Surely, there have already been a lot of discussions on these topics and I've mentioned some of them above. At the same time, when I was watching interviews with some former ISIS supporters such as Shamima Begum or Jack Letts, I've noticed some similarity in their responses. While asked why they joined, they actually did not give a clearly defined answer. For example, Shamima Begum in her 2019 interview with SkyNews said she was just watching ISIS videos and was attracted by them.[41] Similarly, Jack Letts, another former ISIS supporter, struggled to explain why he thought joining ISIS was his duty and called it an emotional and even "spontaneous" decision.[42]

This reference to emotionality and spontaneousness is not something we would often find in terrorism or critical terrorism studies. Most researchers tend to emphasise the rationality behind terrorists' decisions. Moreover, even the most outrageous and seemingly "crazy" acts of violence, such as suicide attacks, are proven to be the product of rational reasoning. Even such a seemingly extreme and illogical act as a suicide attack has instrumental rational considerations behind it.[43] The reasons for it may be different – from pure materialism (often, the family of a suicide attacker receives some financial remuneration from the group) to their belief in a higher reward that awaits them after death (like in jihadism).[44] As Robert F. Trager and Dessislava P. Zagortseva have argued, "Even seemingly fanatical terrorists, intensely motivated by religious beliefs, are not irrational". However, emphasising the rationality of terrorists as opposed to previously existing argument of their "insanity", researchers again seem to suffer from something that critical terrorism studies scholars pointed at: exceptionalising terrorism.[45] Terrorism is often presented as something absolutely extraordinary and so much more dangerous than an ordinary crime; we often unconsciously tend to forget that terrorists despite their terrible crimes are as much humans as we are. This means that like with any other human being, actions taken by terrorists do not only have rational side but also emotional.

Emotions are, indeed, a very interesting, yet neglected, aspect in research in the areas of political science and specifically terrorism.[46] There is an existing trend to see emotions (affect) as irrational and somewhat secondary to rational reasoning.[47] One of the reasons for that is that it seems to be quite difficult to quantify emotions; however, it's been argued that "emotions are grounded in evaluation of social contexts and moral principles and can be studied as social scientists study other variables".[48] It has even been argued that "unconscious

evaluations are far more active and hence far more important than conscious cognitive processing".[49] Therefore, the emotional state of a person can influence the way judgements are made about the external information. This statement is equally applicable to politics; it is likely that a person's political judgement will, to a significant degree, be influenced by their emotions.[50] Moreover, emotions have an ability to not only form new beliefs but to change existing ones and create and change identities – both political and personal.[51] This makes emotions a powerful tool to use when it comes to persuasion.[52] This realisation initiated the conversation about the "affective turn"[53] in international relations, which is a relatively new area of research, exploring the role of emotions and affect in people's decision-making and reactions in politics. A number of researchers, while emphasising the challenge of making reliable conclusions about people's emotions, nevertheless, emphasise how anger, guilt, fear and excitement that audience of political campaigns or events experience may influence the choices they make at elections, decisions that they make at a negotiation table or reactions they express (the example of Arab Spring is probably one of the most iconic ones, when people's anger and frustration over one event spilt over into a full-fledged political protest).[54] Emotions have also been proven to play an important role in social movements' recruitment – by utilising anger, loneliness, pride, and passion, social movements are able to attract and mobilise their members for action in the name of their cause.[55] For example, peasants in El Salvador were engaging in protest movements, and interestingly when asked what exactly drove them to participate, they stated that it was not only anger against the government but the pleasure from the realisation that they were doing something to change the situation in their country.[56] Research shows that emotional dynamics that exists in the real life is also present online. Researchers found often those members of online communities who have a particularly strong and active presence online explain it by the pleasure and excitement that they get from being able to adopt a new identity or avatar that is not available for them in real life.[57] Being online allows them to escape from reality and dive into the fantasy world where they could be whoever they want to be, behave the way they like and be free from any anything that limits their self-expression.

This last idea as well as the emphasis on emotionality and spontaneousness made me think: can be that ISIS propaganda did not simply trigger the "usual" mechanisms such as anger or frustration that eventually led people to joining it, but on a different, more "positive" kind of emotional urge? And if so, what could it be and how would it work knowing the group's involvement in terrible cases of violence? It has often been said that the content of ISIS supporters' social media accounts showed that at least some of them were not posting that much about finding justice and reaching the land of true religion but of having fun and enjoying life. They gave an impression that they were not forced to travel to Syria because of their grievances but were excited to do so.[58] While seeking adventure is not an unknown reason for people to join a terrorist group,[59] ISIS seems to have become the first terrorist group

that deliberately played with this desire and its potential followers' positive emotions in such a systematic and well-planned manner (through social media, video games, music and others).

These thoughts were racing in my mind around the same time when Apple released another version of iPhone. Once I walked along the Oxford Street in London in the early morning, I saw a massive queue of people who came there before the shop even opened to make sure that they would be able to get their new iPhone. I thought again: why would people do something like this? Why would they be happy to sacrifice a few hours of sleep or have to come to work later to get a new version of an iPhone? Knowing how often Apple releases new products, it's quite likely their reasons have nothing to do with an older version not being functional anymore. We all know the answer to this question about Apple – it's a powerful brand and it invests a lot in advertising. Buying an iPhone does not only have to do with the quality of a product, but you actually buy a lifestyle and a particular personal image. And then I thought: well, aren't those young boys and girls who support ISIS and spend hours discussing what type of hair product to bring in Syria to an extent follow the same route? Can it be that the ISIS propaganda was created in a way that would encourage people behave similarly to those iPhone fans? And if so, can it then be then that in some cases what we know as radicalisation (i.e. a gradual process supported/triggered by propaganda) can actually have a much more spontaneous and quick development? And finally, we tended to treat ISIS as a group that came up with absolutely unusual and extraordinary recruitment techniques (well, even I mentioned this here!) that were extremely difficult to counter. But what if we are already familiar with those techniques and are already equipped with mechanisms that can help us deal with a messaging style like this?

I was not the first person who thought about ISIS as a brand. Charlie Winter, Anne Speckhard, Greg Simons and other researchers actually did call ISIS so.[60] Some – for example, Cristina Archetti – even used branding lenses to look at other terrorist organisations.[61] However, at most these attempts (except Archetti's analysis of Al Qaeda and partially Simons's analysis of ISIS's magazines) did not really go beyond attaching the label "brand" to an organisation. But what does it really mean in practice and what exactly the group did to create such a powerful fan base and truly become a "jihadist pop-star" even if for a short period of time and why it worked? I believe that shifting our attention from the discussion of motivations that draw people to terrorism to what techniques that a terrorist (or extremist) organisation uses to convince them to do that and applying branding lenses may give us some additional insight into this problem.

The first question some sceptics may ask: is a comparison between a terrorist organisation and a brand even possible? The answer is yes, and the reason for it is that both are using similar communication techniques to grow its audience.

Jacques Ellul – a French philosopher and author of one of the most influential books on propaganda – said, "The aim of modern propaganda is no longer to modify ideas, but to provoke action".[62] This idea remains as topical nowadays (and probably even more so) than at the time when it was written. Indeed, when one looks at Islamist radical propaganda, it is not particularly interested in people sharing an idea but in people who are willing to do something for that idea. Propaganda, however, according to Ellul, is not necessarily aimed at something evil. Even democratic states use it – when politicians are talking to their voters, when they try to consolidate the nation or when they define the limits of acceptable behaviour.[63]

Another important point, according to Ellul, is that propaganda cannot work in a vacuum. People must already hold particular beliefs and ideas or grievances and frustrations for it to work. Moreover, a man should have a certain "cultural core"[64] or background for propaganda to be effective. This means that messages sent out to the public should resonate with some of their ideas, beliefs and desires. These beliefs may not necessarily be negative or hostile. Propaganda should touch upon things that are important for a person, touch upon something that they care about and hold dear. When one looks at some of the products of ISIS propaganda, one can see that it is true. A lot of topics raised by the group are not about violence or killings; they are about religion, family, friendship and a happier life.

Similarly, propaganda involves the presentation of an object in a culture in such a manner that certain cultural attitudes will be organised towards it.[65] The task of a propagandist in this sense will not only be to form positive attitudes towards that object but also change negative ones and attract neutral ones. To do that, the main challenge for a propagandist is to come up with stimuli that would evoke the maximum positive response and neutralise the negative response.

What is particularly interesting is that propaganda is capable of strengthening flawed ideologies.[66] Propaganda can help conceal the real purpose of flawed ideologies and "repairing" their message, that is, presenting it in a better light than it would have looked like otherwise. In this sense, actors that have flawed ideologies have no other choice but turning to propaganda to make sure their message has the necessary effect. In addition, Stanley also shows similarities between advertisement and propaganda, emphasising how advertisement is essentially one of the versions of it.[67] These observations again demonstrate the potential of examining propaganda through the idea of adversting and marketing.

Over time, however, the term "propaganda" began to be perceived mainly negatively.[68] One of the definitions, for example, says the following: "At the core of the idea of propaganda is a sense of deceitfulness … Propaganda consists of lying, the withholding of information, strategic selectivity, exaggeration, explicit or covert affective appeals."[69] So, propaganda must contain an element of deception.

There seems to be a tendency among scholars in the field to draw clear boundaries between propaganda and such things like marketing and branding, arguing that "good" actors (democratic states, businesses and non-governmental organisations [NGOs]) only use the latter, while "bad guys" (authoritarian states, terrorist organisations) only use the former.[70] However, these boundaries are much more ephemeral, and both types of persuasion can be used by anyone ("consensual organised persuasive communication (OPC)" refers to marketing and branding and "non-consensual OPC" refers to propaganda). An important takeaway from this framework is that "propaganda" and advertising are much closer in their approaches that we tend to think as long as an individual acts upon it freely and in an informed way.[71]

Where can this similarity be seen in practice? First, similarly to propaganda, marketing professionals are looking to project influence on potential customers and encourage them for a certain action (normally buy a product or a service). Of course, one of the main criteria here is the quality of the product.[72] However, often it is not enough; the current market is oversaturated with good quality products and each brand needs to work hard for its customers. Moreover, quality may not be a factor at all.[73] After all, who didn't buy something after hearing or watching a vivid piece of advertising and then realised that the product was very far from good quality standards? How does that happen? Marketing researchers argue that the key to success in branding is creating relationship with a customer.[74] "Relationship" here has quite a strong meaning; it is the ability of a brand to spark strong emotions in a customer and through these emotions form a human-like connection.[75] These emotions could range from trust[76] and commitment,[77] warmth and competence,[78] to romance and love[79] or even passion.[80] Emotional connection with customers has a positive correlation with their level of support for the brand, the level of satisfaction and loyalty.[81] Brands that are able to achieve such a connection by constructing their advertising in a particular way that would manipulate with a person's desires and self-perceptions to encourage them make a purchase (which will be discussed in the next chapter). This emotional connection is particularly strong with brands that customers may use to express themselves (so-called symbolic brand that I'll discuss in more detail in the next chapter). These brands are used by people to tell the world something about themselves – who they are, what their values are and what their unique identity is.[82] The use of such brands make customers feel good about themselves and therefore, their emotional connection with the brand is based on the idea that certain brands make them create an attractive image of themselves. This approached is believed to work particularly well with younger people.[83] The effectiveness of branding is therefore often based on hedonistic feelings that it is able to spark in customers.[84] While, of course, this cannot be considered straight lying that we usually associate with propaganda, branding does seem to resort to some sort of manipulation even if for peaceful purposes.

At the same time, propaganda may not necessarily always rely on straight lying. The majority of ISIS recruits did join them voluntarily (i.e. freely).

Were they also informed? Most people would argue that they were indeed deceived and "manipulated" into becoming members. However, it is known that ISIS videos with executions and tortures were freely available online and most young people saw them and, as one of the "jihadi brides" Shamima Begum noted, "were okay with it".[85] Second, the group's ideological base is Islamic, in a sense that they did not distort the word of the Qur'an.[86] Of course, they interpreted it in the most brutal and barbaric way and cited the most violent and war-mongering theologians. However, the actual text and content of the holy book was not distorted and the group's recruits could have chosen a different interpretation of it if they had wanted to. Third, while the group did present the reality in a more negative light and often as a sweeping generalisation, nevertheless, the cases ISIS was referring to (e.g. killing Muslims in U.S. airstrikes in Syria, the atrocities of the Assad regime, cases of racism and discrimination, media misrepresentation) do happen to a significant number of Muslim people around the globe, and thus cannot be perceived as lies. Fourth, some of the group's social media content cannot be defined as untruthful but indeed promotional. For example, widely known "mujatweets" depicting the daily life of jihadists and showing them having a meal together or playing with cats did not seem to contain explicit lies – after all, even ISIS members are still people who can eat, chat with friends and have some fun – but rather a degree of branding and clever marketing.

Another possible question some people might ask is whether ISIS is indeed in any way unique compared to other terrorist organisations. At the end of the day, Al Qaeda was popular as well at the time, and groups like Baader-Meinhof also tended to have a certain reputation of a "cool" group with its own style and the manner of behaviour. In this context, I would like to cite Richard English who argued that it is impossible to understand terrorism without looking at a specific historical context in which a particular group operates.[87] In this sense, ISIS indeed is an interesting phenomenon, but it was a product of the time period. Partially, it, of course, had to do with the Syrian tragedy. However, it also had to do with changes that our world was and still is going through.

It is not a surprise anymore for anyone to hear that our world is becoming more and more digitalised. The role of technologies and social media is rising every day. If ten years ago, most of us were using Facebook for occasional chats with friends, now a lot of people do not only use its regularly but also for a variety of purposes – signing up for events, reading news or promoting businesses. More and more people are joining several social media networks, and some spend a lot of time in them. Social media often serve as a source for observing new trends, asking advice, finding useful information and having fun. For some, social media even become a means to build their identity – an image on Instagram becomes an avatar of your desired self-image. That is why social media has also become particularly useful for brands – they allow them to promote their products more effectively, build a community, to reach out their target audience quickly and easily and generally build a

new, more human-like type of relationship with them.[88] And indeed, if we think about most successful brands like the already-mentioned Apple or Nike, they all invest a significant amount of effort and creativity into their digital campaigns. So did ISIS, but so also did the campaigners for Leave/Remain during the UK Brexit referendum or supporters of Donald Trump during the presidential elections.[89] So, while ISIS seems to have become the first phenomenon indicating how powerful digital marketing could be, it was not and will not be the last one. Moreover, one of our mistakes while looking at ISIS at the time of its highest success was indeed a tendency to perceive it as something extraordinary and unusual. If, however, we look at the group more at as a product of the epoque and also at a group of human beings (yes, violent and yes, having a twisted ideology, but still humans) it would be much easier to understand it and hopefully its successors too. And there is no doubt that unfortunately, there will be successors at some point. "The digital" will continue developing and we can already see that, for example, far-right groups are using the same types of techniques as ISIS did.[90] It is, therefore, necessary to focus on this example to better understand what to expect next and how we should respond to the emerging threats that are inspired by ISIS.

It is particularly important to do so since when ISIS was active, the governments' attempts to come up with an effective counter-messaging online strategy, which in theory should help to divert people's sympathies from ISIS, was not particularly effective.[91] One of the most famous campaigns was the so-called "Think Again Turn Away" project launched in the United States. The idea was to spread information about ISIS on social media that would debunk the tales told by the group and demonstrate its "true face". In reality, the project was unsuccessful as many similar ones.[92] Researchers focusing on communications, such as Charlie Winter and Cristina Archetti argue, that the main reason for the failure of such kind of an initiative is the incompetent way of the narrative construction. There is also the lack of understanding of how the group's propaganda works. Namely, practitioners built their counter-narratives based on the idea how bad ISIS is.[93] Research, however, shows that ISIS in its turn relies more on a positive message, for example, presenting itself in the attractive light rather than criticising its enemies. Moreover, the counter-narrative is based on the arguments that appeal to the recruits' rationality.[94] Using propaganda, ISIS, like many other groups, appeals to people's emotions. This is something that counter-terrorism officials completely neglected, and this book will attempt to suggest possible ways to build more effective narratives debunking terrorist propaganda.

In this book I am going to explore ISIS-produced propaganda to understand how exactly the group uses marketing techniques to connect with its followers and convince them to join the organisation (either in the West or migrate to Syria) and through what mechanisms this happens.

There are several principles that informed my overall methodological approach, compared to other research. First, I have attempted to step away from the threat ISIS poses, to focus more on the fact that, despite its brutality,

ISIS nevertheless consists of people who, in most cases, had normal lives before joining it. I have attempted to approach the problem of the group's recruitment success without exceptionalising and "demonising" it. That means that in many parts of my analysis I will be showing how decisions and behaviour of ISIS and its supporters may be not that different from ours. In my analysis, I have also attempted to look at recruitment from two sides simultaneously– i.e. from the point of view of propagandist and their target audience. This allowed me to see a stronger connection between the communication techniques that are used to reach out and convince the audience and the effect they have on it.

The timeline of this analysis is 2014–2017. This was the period of ISIS's highest activity and the highest level of success and creative potential of its propaganda. I focused on the group's Western recruits and chose English-speaking accounts of ISIS supporters and the group's propagandist materials as they are the most easily accessible online not only for researchers but also for the consumers. One of the proofs is that Britain, for example, was registered as one of the largest sources of foreign fighters and radical Islamists.[95] Moreover, according to a 2017 report by Policy Exchange, jihadi online propaganda attracts more reactions in Britain than in any other country.[96]

This research will also primarily focus on Sunni Muslims, as they are the main target audience for ISIS, unlike, for example, Shi'a Muslims, who were declared enemies. It should be noted that among Sunni Muslims there are different levels of devotion; thus, some may adhere to Salafist Islam and some may have never attended a mosque. Therefore, I attempt to understand what the universal appeal was that ISIS had that managed to attract different types of supporters.

This research will hypothesise that the mechanism explored here is mainly applicable to young Muslims, aged 15–25. There are several reasons to think so. First, the youth made up the largest proportion of ISIS's foreign fighters.[97] Second, the youth are the most active social media users and social media used to be the main source of ISIS propaganda and, therefore, young people became a significant support base for the group. Third, Rosenbaum-Elliott and his colleagues highlight the particular importance of symbolic brands in the formation of young people's identities as well as young people's higher involvement in advertising.[98] However, it is necessary to emphasise that since the scope of this volume is the creation and effect of ISIS's propaganda rather than the characteristics of its audience, further research is needed to firmly determine who is susceptible to propaganda formed around a spontaneous choice.

There are three main questions that I try to answer: (1) What did ISIS do to attract its followers?; (2) What was its followers' reaction to these efforts?; (3) How did ISIS prevent its followers from disengagement? I used three main research methods: thematic analysis, narrative analysis and discourse-centred ethnography. To understand how ISIS appealed to its followers' desire for self and social symbolism, I applied the thematic analysis to ISIS's magazines

Dabiq and *Rumiyah* to show how the group created a number of attractive images for its followers. To examine the process of creation and delivering its message to the target audience through stories, I used narrative analysis. To see how the efforts of ISIS affected its target audience, I relied on online discourse-centric ethnography, which would demonstrate how ISIS followers saw themselves and how they felt as part of this group. Finally, to examine the efforts that ISIS took to prevent followers from feeling guilty and potential disengagement, I again used thematic analysis of ISIS's magazines again to examine what arguments the group used to prevent its supporters from disengagement. In the next section, each of these methodological choices will be discussed in more detail.

What is important to note here is that while ISIS is chosen as a case study here, the aim of this book is not to offer another explanation to the group's success or offer yet another model of strategic logic of its propaganda. There is enough evidence now that other groups, particularly extreme far-right groups, are adopting the same approach to their recruitment and propaganda.[99] Therefore, rather unlike previously mentioned pieces that focus uniquely on ISIS, the purpose of the book is to introduce a theoretical framework that both unites the already existing knowledge about the use of branding in propaganda (especially ISIS propaganda) with some new insights from the field of marketing. The final goal is to offer a model that does not only consolidates our knowledge about the role of marketing in strategic logic of ISIS's propaganda but can also be extrapolated to the analysis of other groups' recruitment activities. The model can be used to analyse how these groups influence their audiences, why the audiences react and respond to them in a positive way and consequently – what can be done about it?

This book is going to first discuss in more detail what we know about the effect of branding and marketing techniques on people and present the model that is going to help me analyse ISIS propaganda through branding lenses (Chapter 1). In Chapters 2 and 3 I will focus on each technique in detail, showing how and what ISIS did to attract people's attention and make them "like" their propaganda and become excited about it. Chapters 4 and 5 will demonstrate that this propaganda style indeed had a desired effect on ISIS's target audience. In Chapter 6, I will show what ISIS did to prevent supporters from disappointment and consequent disengagement. The Conclusion will summarise my arguments and discuss what possible ways to deal with terrorist propaganda branding lenses can offer us.

Notes

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1 Emotional Choice: How to Make You "Buy"

What You Didn't Plan To

When terrorist organisations need to deliver and disseminate their message, they use propaganda to do so. In its turn, the main tool with which brands liaise with their customers is advertising – both through traditional media and especially through social media.[1] This is essentially the language of a brand, its tool of persuasion, and the "seduction" of a customer, which offers them something they seek to obtain through acquiring the brand's products. Propaganda, as mentioned in the introduction, is often compared to advertising in a sense that both try to convince a person to perform a particular action (e.g. buying something in the case of advertising or joining a particular organisation in the case of propaganda). But how does this happen? And why do some brands become very popular? In this chapter, I am going to discuss what makes brands capable of attracting consumers and then use these ideas to develop my own theoretical model for explaining the functioning of terrorist propaganda.

When we think of a brand on a basic consumer's level, we rarely reflect on specific mechanism that make a brand successful. Nevertheless, they exist and they are specific to each type of a brand. Most often brands are categorised according to the purpose for which they are used.[2] Two of the biggest and commonly accepted groups of brands are functional and symbolic.[3] Functional brands are normally used by customers to satisfy their needs; for example, a phone is bought to make calls or a car is bought to travel. While choosing a functional brand, a customer does not form an emotional connection with it; it is bought for purely practical purposes.[4] Customers, however, can also buy brands for a symbolic purpose. It means that they use a brand not that much to satisfy their practical need but rather to express themselves, to tell the world something about their personality and to project a particular image of self that they want to be known for.[5] The understanding of symbolic brands, therefore, is centred around three main concepts: symbolism (as it becomes clear from the name), a customer's identity and emotions.

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Symbolism has an important role in human interactions. Specifically, it has three major characteristics:

1. Humans act towards things based on the meaning those things have for them.
2. Those meanings originate from social interactions with others.
3. Those meanings are processed in an interpretative process as one is concerned with that thing.[6]

Consumption acts as an important means of symbolism. It helps us create social reality around us and make sense of it and others.[7] Thus, consumption that does not only allow consumers make judgements about others (e.g. wearing a T-shirt with a logo of a football team would tell others that a person is likely to be its fan) but also express themselves ("we are what we wear"; "we are what we have").[8]

In this sense, consumption becomes an important building block of a customer's identity. The "self" is often described as a "symbolic project" where a person requires symbolic artefacts to contrast their identity.[9] Possessions are a significant part of these artefacts: customers often invest time and energy in looking and choosing brands that they perceive as best expressing their personality.[10] For example, if someone mentions that they only buy cruelty-free brands, it will tell others that animals' well-being is important for that person.

Thus, brands try to incorporate their customers' values, goals, style, aspirations and the way of life; they can also be associated with a certain ideology a customer has.[11] A good example of this is the products of Apple, which is not simply offering you a good phone or a quality laptop but also a particular lifestyle and an image: a successful, dynamic, active person who is also wealthy enough to afford its products. Often, symbolic brands can also be characterised as "cool", meaning that a brand possesses such qualities as originality, authenticity, energy, high status, and rebelliousness is popular and at the same time makes its customer part of a certain subculture, which gives them a feeling of being special.[12] Due to this fact, symbolic brands are also closely connected with emotions.[13] Customers decide whether they want to buy a brand based on what feelings they give to them. If a brand is able to spark excitement, make a customer feel good about themselves, and construct a more attractive self-image, it is likely that they would choose it to express their identity. Then they start to form a strong emotional connection with a brand (perceiving it as more than "just" a brand but rather a part of their self) and become its loyal supporters.[14]

In marketing, there are models that are not only able to illustrate this process but also provide some better understanding of how it happens. Their main premise is that in symbolic consumption, customers choose a brand instinctively and almost in the state of affect, which means that they sometimes cannot explain their reasons for the choice but just "feel" it. When asked why they bought a product by a particular brand, customers whose choice

was emotional rather than rational often struggle to give a clear answer. What is particularly important is that brands can *facilitate* the emotional choice and lead customers to the desired decision.[15]

As argued previously, propaganda and marketing are quite similar in their appeal to emotions and perceptions of people. I, therefore, believe that some marketing concepts can be effectively used to explain how terrorist organisations manage to convince people to join using marketing tools. In this book, I am going to present my own model of emotional choice that can be used to analyse and explain processes that happen between a terrorist (extremist) organisation and its target audience in the communicative sphere. The basis for my model was the model of emotion-driven choice created by the professor of marketing, Richard Rosenbaum-Elliott, and the concept of narrative advertising.

In the next part, I am going to discuss the ideas that helped me create my model of emotional choice in more detail and then in the end describe the model itself.

Self and Social Symbolism

In the introduction, I have mentioned that the role of emotions tends to be disregarded when it comes to international relations and politics. Surprisingly, the same could have been said about the field of marketing. Emotions are believed to be often ignored in the analysis of the consumer's behaviour, even though cognitive models only managed to explain 20 per cent of variance in it.[16] However, similar to politics, emotions act as powerful drivers for people's choices in consumption, even if they do not realise this.[17] The role of emotions is particularly important in the case of a postmodern consumer, that is, a consumer whose main motivation for consumption is identity construction.[18]

As mentioned earlier, in the world, consumption has become a cultural practice that not only helps a person build and maintain their identity but that can also help them form their social connections and facilitate communication with others. Most importantly, consumption renders what a person wants to express and show to the world about themselves. For example, "a Mac user" projects an image of a creative and mobile person. Brands, therefore, have a very strong connection with people's emotions. Some brands are chosen because they say something to others about a person that they cannot communicate by themselves. They are used to define who we are and to validate our identity.

Thus, "the symbolic meaning of consumption can be seen as a potent and perhaps prime motivation for emotion-driven choice".[19] These motivations can be divided into two interconnected groups: self-symbolism and social symbolism.

Self-symbolism refers to the direct construction of a person's identity and its projection into the world. Brands that a person buys help them project a certain image of themselves in the eyes of the others. Brands, therefore, are able to

create a situation when "an individual is free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by the individual's particular sociocultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by the individual's immediate social experience".[20] For example, if a customer wants to present themselves as a successful person, there will be several self-images that can be associated with this identity: a particular way to dress, speak or specific types of gadgets that person is using. A more specific example: if someone sees being a football fan as part of their identity, they would be prone to visibly demonstrate it by wearing themed T-shirts, using specific slang, attending a particular type of events or re-posting football-related content on social media.

Brands can (and should!) be proactive in this process of identity construction. They can directly appeal to customers' identities and offer them attractive self-images that customers can incorporate in building their "self".[21] This is done through promoting these images in brand's advertising. For example, when we see an advertisement of Apple products, they are shown as attributes of people with active lifestyle, successful in life, rich, and popular. This appeals to some people's desire to be (or appear) like that and eventually leads some people to buying Apple products not that much for their functional value but for the image and idea they carry and project.

Moreover, these images should be socially acceptable and desirable, which pertains to the idea of social symbolism. Social symbolism constructs the social world, that is, a person's connections and interactions with others. It is essentially about the desire of people to belong to a certain group, which would authenticate the symbolic meaning a person takes from the brand's advertising. This means that a person wants their identities to be validated and accepted by others; thus it must be something that is considered attractive and desirable in the community that a person belongs to.[22] That is why the images, created by brands, do not emerge from vacuum – they are a product of a careful research and knowledge of the brand's audience and need to reflect their interests, concerns, and preferences.

Narrative Advertising

The question that follows next is how does brand convince its target audience that those images are something they need to pursue? Even if they are indeed socially desirable and acceptable, it does not automatically guarantee that a person would fall for them automatically (otherwise, it would have been too easy!). Here is where another concept from marketing can help. While Rosenbaum-Elliott and his colleagues, whose model I use as a basis, do not specifically talk about, it is strongly connected with it. It is the so-called narrative advertising, which is used by brands that wish to establish an emotional connection with their customers.

According to several researchers, depending on the method of creation, advertising can be argumentative or narrative.[23] Argumentative advertising is based on facts and logic and appeals to the rationality of a customer. While

it may be effective, this type of advertising is more likely to provoke, in a customer, a desire to argue, and may consequently diminish the likelihood of a positive response from them.[24] Narrative advertising relies on a customer's emotions. "Narrative" here means the following: "one or more episodes consisting of actors engaged in actions to achieve goals" and contains a "sequence initiated by some events and actions result[ing] in outcome(s)".[25] Narratives "are organised in terms of a series of events occurring over time, and these events are structured in a way that the causal relationship among them can be inferred".[26] A narrative is simply a story told by someone to describe a certain event or development. Consequently, narrative advertising tells a story, which allows a customer to envision themselves in the shoes of advertisement's character and thus match their experience. A story is "the storyteller's production and the account of an event or sequence of events from an initial state or outcome".[27]

Storytelling is a very powerful tool that has a strong influence on our perception of the world. People make sense of the world through stories.[28] Consequently, stories in a brand's advertising help customers to understand that brand better through a particular context, and to construct their own stories through the interaction with the brand's product.[29] Usually, in their stories, brands either show the positive consequences of a product consumption or link their products with what people particularly desire – for example, "romance, achievement, adventure or hopes".[30] A typical story consists of a plot, characters, and the ending, and normally has a certain drama in it, meaning that it describes a certain "tension between protagonist and the main characters".[31]

Eventually, stories help a customer to form a strong emotional connection with a brand as they appeal to customers' inner desires and concerns related to their identity (here I call these appeals "hooks", i.e. themes that a brand uses in its stories to resonate with their customers' preferences). Research shows that storytelling works particularly well for experiential brands, that is, brands that offer a particular experience as they allow a customer to directly immerse themselves into that experience.[32] This process – "a mental process in which people become absorbed in a story and thus transported into a narrative world where they temporarily lose access to the real world facts"[33] – is called narrative transportation. Narrative transportation is considered to be an alternative, more powerful route to persuasion,[34] and is the key to the success of a brand's advertising, because it reduces a target audience's capacity for critical thinking and formulating counter-arguments, and eventually gives a brand several positive outcomes:

1. Brands tend to be evaluated by customers more favourably.[35]
2. Narrative advertising sparks warm feelings and emotions in customers and can encourage them to suspend rational judgements.[36]
3. The link between a customer's "self" and the brand becomes stronger, forming an emotional bond between them.[37]

What is particularly important is that narrative ads can help companies to mitigate the negative effect of a weak product argument.[38] This means that even if a company produces a product that may be of a lower quality than that of its competitors, it might still be able to convince customers to buy it by using stories in the product's ads. This may explain why terrorist and extremist organisations that use this technique in their propaganda can be successful despite the fact that from the rational point of view their "offering" (death or potential arrest) is not that attractive.

Self-illusion, Excitement, and Formation of the Emotional Connection with the Brand

The mechanisms described previously – the appeal to a person's desire for symbolism (self and social) as motivation and the use of narrative advertising (i.e. storytelling) to reach the brand's audiences – lead to preference formation, that is, the stage when a customer develops a strong feeling towards the brand and sees themselves through the prism of the images offered by it.

This process is described to be happening through self-focus and self-illusion. Self-focus means that a customer's assessment of a product/service happens through the prism of self-assessment. For example, we rarely buy a piece of clothing based simply on how it looks by itself. We would normally make a decision to purchase it after we like the way *we* look in it. So, we are more concerned what image of us a brand will create than about a brand per se.

Self-illusion means that people create their own reality, which may differ from the objective reality. Modern consumption can be described as "self-illusionary hedonism" even though we "know something is to be false but feel it to be true". Our rational beliefs are not strong enough to prevail over our excitement about the purchase, even if we know we should not have made it. As the authors humorously put it, "How else can we justify those new shoes when there are already ten pairs sitting in the closet?"[39]

The emotional preference formation has certain peculiarities. First, it involves a holistic perception of an image a person wants to create. If they want to look like a successful businessman, they would assume that they would need to buy an expensive suit, an iPhone and an expensive watch. They do not, therefore, justify each of these purchases; they would consider them a must-have for the desired image.

This is supported by non-verbal imagery – communications of emotions through non-verbal channels. People would seek for them among each other (e.g. the facial reactions of their peers to their image). This can also be expressed in a form of traditional images. For example, we look at a picture of a happy, beautiful woman with white teeth and a charming smile and have a desire to buy the toothpaste she is using, to look a little bit like her. Another example: people use specific avatars on their social media to tell the world how they imagine themselves.

Customers, therefore, tend to bring themselves into a certain world of fantasy – a brand gives them such a positive and exciting image of themselves that they tend to suspend emotional judgement and resort to living in an imaginary world. For example, for a poor student who has spent all their money to buy the latest iPhone, this purchase would make them feel successful and rich. The excitement of this feeling becomes so strong that it overshadows rational thoughts about how that student is going to pay their debts and sustain themselves for the next several months. Essentially, a customer becomes lost in that fantasy world that brand created for them with the stories and they see themselves through the prism of the fictional characters introduced by the brand. They would like to achieve that prefect image that the brand promotes as it gives them a feeling that their life would become better that way (they would be more successful, cool, and likeable).

To sum up, marketing concepts presented above are helpful to describe the dynamics of brand's interaction with customers and the emotional effect its efforts have on their perceptions of the brand. This is done through the appeal to customers' desire for self- and social symbolism or a desire to project a certain attractive image, which is considered an important part of a customer's identity. A brand does it by creating stories. Customers then become immersed in an imaginary world where they see themselves through the prism of those story characters. The characters, on the one hand, represent the customers and on the other hand they possess attractive characteristics that customers would like to have. A brand gives customers a promise that it would be able to help them achieve these attractive images. Customers then develop a strong emotional connection with the brand since they believe that with the help of that brand and its products they would be able to achieve this idealised and more attractive version of self. This bond eventually leads them to the decision to purchase the brand's product.

The Model of Emotional Choice: The Case of Extremist/Terrorist Organisations

Now, how is all that has been discussed before relevant to the dynamics of recruits' persuasion in extremist/terrorist organisations? Their propaganda can equally be viewed through the prism of emotion-driven choice: extremist groups use marketing techniques to establish an emotional connection with their potential supporters. ISIS has become the most striking example of it – the group indeed transformed itself into a brand and used the same techniques to attract and emotionally connect with its target audience.

That emotional bond eventually leads them to making an affective choice of affiliating themselves with the organisation in one way or another. It is important to emphasise that here that in the context of a terrorist/extremist organisation (and ISIS specifically) I understand the act of affiliation (or "purchasing the product" in the marketing terms) quite broadly – for example, it could be formally joining, committing an attack on their behalf or doing a

certain work for it (e.g. starting promoting its ideas). What I am interested primarily is indeed how the idea of connecting with an organisation comes to people's heads and why they go for it despite possible negative consequences. Now, I am going to explain how exactly this happens.

First, it is important to emphasise, that similar to a brand, a terrorist organisation needs to know who its recruits are, what they want, what their interests are, and their likes and dislikes. I mentioned earlier that marketing and specifically advertising and even propaganda itself do not happen in a vacuum – they reflect on and are connected to the people's experiences and real lives. This does not mean that an organisation necessarily needs to reflect people's grievances. Rather, it needs to make them believe that it "knows" them (knows who they are, what their lives look like, what their interests may be). A terrorist organisation then starts talking to its potential supporters and disseminates its ideas and worldviews. This is often happening through stories: that is, ideas do not exist independently, they form a unified narrative (or narratives) that present a particular picture. These narratives often have all necessary elements – not only plots and endings, but also protagonists, that is, main character. This character is first meant to represent characteristics typical for potential recruits; they should be able to identify themselves with them. What is most important is that this character also often appeals to the followers' desire for self and social symbolism – the character's development represents a perfect image that people may consider attractive both on personal (self-symbolism) and social (social symbolism) and would be willing to use for their identity-building. For example, an image of a "real man" usually has a positive connotation in many societies and communities. An organisation may use this image in its stories to tell its potential recruits: "This character is a real man and they are so similar to you. You can become one as well if you follow the example of the character".

These stories, therefore, trigger the mechanism of narrative transportation – people become absorbed by the narrative, they are immersed into an imaginary world where they see an idealised version of themselves. They believe that an organisation does not only reflect on their personal experiences, but it offers them a way to achieve this attractive image, build the version of "self" that they want to see and project into the world. The stories disseminated by an organisation, therefore, trigger particular "hooks" – things that its potential recruits carry about and consider important for their identity-building. As the organisation's propaganda triggers these "hooks", the target audience forms an emotional connection with it. They cannot explain it rationally, but rather "feel" that the organisation "understands" them or "cares" about them, represents them and is capable of giving them something they are striving for. People are now willing to become affiliated with the organisation as they see it as a way to achieve those attractive images (for example, "Committing a terrorist attack is an act of military bravery, and military bravery is a sign of being a real man"). The choice can be considered affective as the decision to join in this mechanism does not happen as a result of a careful consideration

but an emotional desire to project a certain image. Drawing parallels with brands again, one can think of an example of a girl trying on a Chanel jacket and getting a remark from a shop assistant who would say that she looks like an aristocrat in it. If this is something that resonates with a girl's identity, she would feel excited about an opportunity to project an image that she wants to create. Thus, she would be quite likely to end up the jacket, even if from the rational point of view this might not be the best decision (e.g. because of the price).

Similar to this example, a potential recruit may want to look more masculine. He then comes across propaganda by an organisation that posts pictures of strong and brave-looking men and stories about their "feats" and achievements. The idea that the organisation is attempting to render is that the recruit can also become that man. All he needs to do is to become a member of this organisation and do what it advises him to do. A target person becomes immersed in that fictional story and an idea that he can resemble that amazing strong man excites him and the promise of an organisation to help him with that facilitates an emotional bond between them – which eventually results in him joining or committing an attack for the organisation.

How one can see if this immersion into the fantasy and the formation of an emotional connection really happens? If we talk about online marketing/propaganda, it is relatively easy to observe the effect that a brand/organisation's message has on its target audience. Their online behaviour starts reflecting the ideas disseminated by the organisation – they may start presenting themselves through the prism of images offered by the organisation, refer to its stories, use the same terms and expressions to describe themselves and/or the world as the organisation uses. Another indication that propaganda (or advertising) has the necessary effect and does facilitate the emotional connection is the emergence of the community. This does not only indicate that propaganda indeed worked, but it further intensifies its effect.

Previously, I mentioned that brands try to appeal to the desire of potential customers for social symbolism: that is, a desire to belong to a community where they do not only feel comfortable but also where they are accepted and admired. This helps them to further strengthen their identities and excitement about them. They share the same affection for the brand, they "speak the same language", and belonging to that community would validate a newly adopted identity, as that individual will be around like-minded people. A community is "based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand. It is specialised because at its centre is a branded good or service. Like other communities, it is marked by a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility".[40]

Fans of particularly successful brands do not simply form a community, but they are able to create subcultures. Brand communities and brand subcultures have several significant differences. First, brand communities are merely interested in the commercial element of the brand. They accept the fact that brand plays an important role in their lives, but not a major one.

Brand subcultures, in their turn, are centred on the brand and make it part of the lifestyle.[41]

The subculture is defined as a "distinctive subgroup of society that self-selects on the basis of a shared commitment to a particular product class, brand or consumption activity". Other characteristics of a subculture of consumption include "an identifiable, hierarchical social structure, a unique ethos, or set of shared beliefs and values; and unique jargons, rituals, and modes of symbolic expression".[42] The role of subculture in forming an emotional connection between a brand and its target audience is hard to underestimate. As I mentioned before, on the one hand, belonging to a subculture intensifies the feeling of belonging as people share the same cultural attributes and feel that they are surrounded by like-minded peers. Thus, people bond with each other and consequently the identities that they build with the help of the brand become stronger as they are validated by the people from their "in-group".

At the same time, belonging to a subculture may intensify the excitement among the members. The reason why it is happening is because a subculture is often associated with a concept of "cool", which was mentioned earlier. One of the definitions of a brand's coolness (given by consumers) is being subcultural and "high status", aka being exclusive and thus not available to everyone.[43]

This idea can be applicable to online extremist/terrorist communities as well as research showed that the Internet has become a powerful mechanism of the creation of subcultural identity.[44] For example, ISIS members have to maintain anonymity and not reveal their personality, they have their own vocabulary, their internal jokes are that no one outside understands and there is a particular style to their accounts. The conversations about high ideas of saving Muslims around the world and serving Allah make them feel privileged and special, which increases their excitement about being members of this group and the brand's supporters.

To sum up all this again, the process of emotional choice when it comes to an extremist/terrorist organisation can be described through several steps. First, an organisation creates propaganda that is aimed to transport their potential followers into an imaginary world or the world of fantasy. The organisation does it by appealing to potential supporters' desire for self- and social symbolism, that is, to create an image of "self" which is perceived as attractive both by a person and their social circles and is used to build their identity. The organisation, therefore, offers potential recruits a number of attractive images that are presented ("promoted") in the format of stories. These stories have "hooks", that is, trigger specific identity-related desires and concerns of the target audience. Thanks to these "hooks", at the second stage, consumers or potential supporters become absorbed by the stories and start seeing themselves through the prism of those attractive images. This is expressed though the way how they describe themselves and the world also form a community or a subculture where they also further strengthen this feeling by creating a

unique and exclusive space where outsiders are not allowed. The anticipation of achieving a desired self-image (even if only in their mind) excites people. This eventually leads to the formation of a strong emotional connection with the organisation, which then leads to an emotional choice – that is, a choice that was made under the influence of emotions (in this case excitement) rather than rational judgement – to become affiliated with it as a way to achieve all those attractive prospects that the organisation promised. This choice is hard to explain with any rational arguments and it has an instinctive or affective nature – thus it can happen to anyone. The only thing that matters whether the images promoted by the organisation pertain into a person's inner desires.

The Aftermath of Emotional Choice: Dealing with Consumer's Guilt

With the successful formation of an emotional connection with its target audience, the task for a brand is not over, however. Once a person has made a choice, they will have to face its consequences. When the choice was made under the influence of emotions, it is very common for a person to feel guilt, anxiety, and regret.[45] This is a relatively typical situation when the decision was made based on a feeling of excitement and euphoria experienced at the time.

Understandably, these negative emotions may break the established emotional connection between a consumer and a brand, and thus the latter would attempt to mitigate these feelings or prevent customers from them.[46] Thus, a brand is able to manipulate the consumer's guilt to mitigate it.[47] Consumers may feel guilt after purchasing a brand's product as they are driven to this decision by a search for excitement and hedonism. For example, it can be buying and eating a cake and then regretting it, or joining an expensive fitness club and then getting worried about savings. One of the ways to mitigate negative feelings is to show that this feeling is inappropriate and that the consumer should instead focus on the pleasure afforded by the consumption of the product. The marketer would thus create a state of "guiltless hedonism" in the consumer who will then "find delight in the enjoyment or the anticipation of enjoyment of the product, neither of which will be slighted by subsequent guilt".[48] The literature on emotions suggests various mechanisms that help people deal with guilt. These are: shifting the blame on to someone else; presentation of one's actions as justified and avoidance of presenting oneself in a negative light; and avoiding responsibility for one's actions.[49,50] The use of these tactics facilitates a process that Hall and Fincham called "pseudo-self-forgiveness".[51] ISIS seems to use all of them to address its followers' seemingly rational justifications for their choice to facilitate the state of "guiltless hedonism", and thus keep them engaged with the brand and maintain their newly created identities. Importantly, these guilt-coping mechanisms are the same ones that people would use in any other (less extraordinary) situation, which shows the high degree of "normality" engrained in the group's operation.

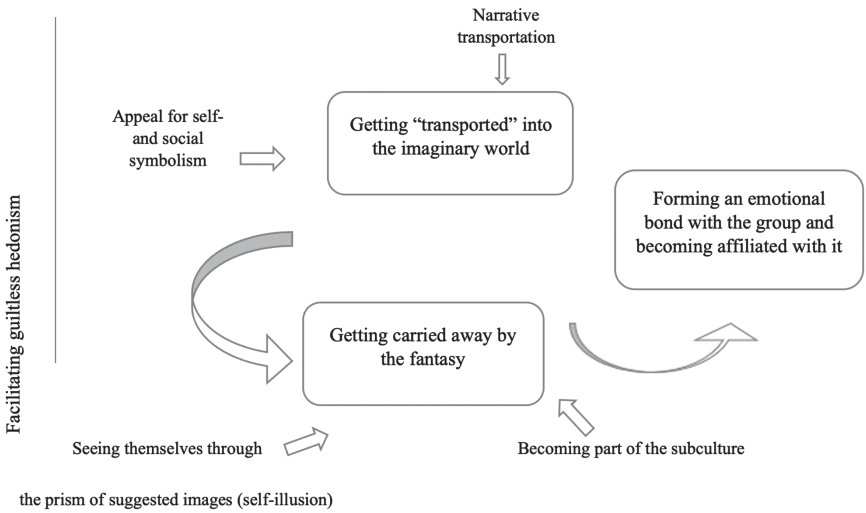
Narrative transportation
Appeal for self- and social symbolism
Getting "transported" into the imaginary world
Forming an emotional bond with the group and becoming affiliated with it
Facilitating guiltless hedonism
Getting carried away by the fantasy
Seeing themselves through
Becoming part of the subculture
the prism of suggested images (self-illusion)

Figure 1.1 The prism of suggested images (self-illusion).
Source: Author's creation.

Visually, the overall model of the process of emotional choice for an organisation's recruit would look like the one shown in Figure 1.1.

There are several reasons to think that this model is more applicable to younger people (15–25 years old). First, the youth made up the largest proportion of ISIS's foreign fighters.[52] Second, the youth are the most active social media users and social media used to be the main source of ISIS propaganda and, therefore, young people became a significant support base for the group. Third, Rosenbaum-Elliott and his colleagues highlight the particular importance of symbolic brands in the formation of young people's identities as well as young people's higher involvement in advertising.[53] However, it is necessary to emphasise that since the scope of this volume is the creation and effect of ISIS's propaganda rather than the characteristics of its audience, further research is needed to firmly determine who is susceptible to propaganda formed around a spontaneous choice.

To explore each stage of the model, I built a database consisting of all existing issues of *Dabiq* (15 issues) and *Rumiyah* (13 issues) available on Jihadology, a website collecting jihadi propagandist materials for research purposes. I also collected 80 pro-ISIS accounts from Twitter, with the overall number of tweets being 15,473. Most accounts were created in 2013–2014 and were active until 2015–2017. Some accounts have remained active until the present day, but the content of their tweets has changed.

There are three main questions that I try to answer: (1) What did ISIS do to attract its followers?; (2) What was its followers' reaction to these efforts?;

(3) How did ISIS prevent its followers from disengagement? To understand how ISIS appealed to its followers' desire for self and social symbolism, I applied the thematic analysis to ISIS's magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* to show how the group created a number of attractive images for its followers. To examine the process of creation and delivering its message to the target audience through stories, I used narrative analysis. To see how the efforts of ISIS affected its target audience, I relied on online discourse-centric ethnography focusing on Twitter accounts of ISIS's supporters, which would demonstrate how ISIS followers saw themselves and how they felt as part of this group. Finally, to examine the efforts that ISIS took to prevent followers from feeling guilty and potential disengagement, I again used thematic analysis of ISIS's magazines again to examine what arguments the group used to prevent its supporters from disengagement. In the next section, each of these methodological choices will be discussed in more detail.

As mentioned, thematic analysis uncovers two aspects of the emotional choice model: self-symbolism and relieving of guilt. By identifying the key themes, I attempted to answer the following questions: (1) What kinds of images does ISIS offered to its followers and what characteristics do they have? and (2) How did ISIS convince its members to remain part of the group despite controversies surrounding it (i.e. how does it maintain the positive emotional bond with its followers)? As I was searching for specific themes in the texts of magazines, I only coded for them and omit irrelevant ones, as described in the article by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke.[54]

For both elements, the procedure of analysis was the same:

1. Familiarisation with data – reading all issues of magazines. (28 in total)
2. Identification of articles of interest – as I approach the data with a specific question and task, the initial familiarisation with data allowed her to eliminate articles that are irrelevant to this analysis
3. Coding
4. Searching for specific themes
5. Reviewing themes to make sure they correspond with codes
6. Naming themes.[55]

So far, I have identified several main themes: a true believer (or good Muslim), a superman, a martyr (as a distinct part of the image of superman), a stranger, a superwoman. Each of them represents a particular image that ISIS was offering to its recruits. These themes were obtained through axial coding (i.e. the process of relating sub-categories to a category).[56] For this part of the analysis, I also paid attention to sub-themes that represent the characteristics that each of these images have, that is, what and how one should do/have/behave to become like this particular ideal image. For the part exploring the means ISIS used to retain supporters, I built my analysis around the mechanisms used to cope with negative feelings such as shifting the blame on to someone else, presentation of one's actions as justified,

avoidance of presenting oneself in a negative light and avoiding responsibility for one's actions.[57]

For the part exploring the storytelling aspect of the ISIS brand, I used narrative analysis. I followed the model suggested by Polkinghorne, who explained it like this:

> Narrative analysis relates events and actions to one another by configuring them as contributors to the advancement of a plot. The story constituted by narrative integration allows for the incorporation of the notions of human purpose and choice as well as chance happenings, dispositions, and environmental presses.[58]

Polkinghorne also notes that there are two main genres of stories we can discover while conducting narrative analysis: tragedy and comedy. "Tragedy" refers to a story in which a protagonist does not achieve the goal, and "comedy" to a story where a protagonist does achieve the goal.[59] The main question the researcher should ask themselves is: How did a protagonist come to a specific outcome (ending of a story)?[60]

I conducted preparatory analysis to be able then to construct the stories. At this stage, I again conducted thematic analysis of each magazine's issue to identify the themes that are most prominent in each of them. The "specific themes" that I looked for are going to be those that contain a certain element to a story; thus, they should refer either to a description of a character or to the development of a plot. Then, I organised them chronologically, to identify which elements of the data contribute to the development of the story (plot) and find the connections between them (why and how certain actions were undertaken). Then, at the final stage, I organised them according to the basic story structure, where we have a protagonist and events forming a plot. A plot develops in climax and then an ending event comes.[61] By "protagonist", I mean the actors of a story; by "plot", I mean a series of events happening to the actors; by "climax", I mean the moment of highest tension; and by "ending", I mean the certain logical conclusion, the result of the characters' actions. Following this, I joined all these elements together to create several stories that ISIS was creating and promoting in its magazines for its followers. These stories are written in a generalised way, that is, as a "typical" story that can be encountered across the issues, rather than a story that has specific details about the characters (e.g. names) or their actions.

Finally, to explore potential recruits' reactions to ISIS's propaganda, I conducted research on their online community. Specifically, I focused on two angles. The first one reflects on how the group's members use the symbols associated with ISIS to form a community (or subculture), express their new identity and how this belonging to subculture further strengthened their excitement.

I was also looking for evidence of a distorted and hyper-positive self-perception of ISIS followers (self-illusion) after they become affiliated with the

group. I searched for the indication of this in their conversations and in the language that was being used. These two parts of the analysis are done through discourse-centred online ethnography conducted on Twitter. I will also use elements of thematic analysis to show shared meanings held by ISIS supporters and elements of discourse analysis to highlight the community members' self-perception, perception of the in-group (ISIS) and out-groups (ISIS's enemies).

At first, I looked at the motivation for social symbolism and how ISIS has created a shared space for its supporters in which they could strengthen and maintain their new identities.[62] I drew on the concept of subculture and demonstrated how ISIS created shared online social practices and meanings (attitudes) that, according to Adam King, are also an important building block of a subculture.[63] To show this, I was looking for various online artefacts that can be considered elements of online subculture such as, for example, specific topics members of the community discussed, visual materials (photos, videos) that they share, how they describe themselves and the world through the prism of pro-ISIS vision, common jokes, cultural references and elements of fun and "cool". Then, I examined ISIS followers' social media and tried to identify how they feel as part of ISIS. How do they see themselves? Did they really adopt the images offered by ISIS and was it possible to notice their excitement? Here, I paid attention to the ways in which ISIS followers described themselves and how it reflected their newly adopted, exciting identity. This was done through analysis of their posts. I also examined visual materials that ISIS supporters were sharing and discussed how they can be seen as a reflection of ISIS followers' excitement and self-illusion.

It is important to note that this model does not have an ambition to become a universal explanation for the reasons why people become affiliated with terrorist/extremist groups. As shown previously, people have different motivations, paths and trajectories that lead them to terrorism, and the emotional choice model only offers another way of thinking about it by focusing on an area that has been studied less – such as the role of positive emotions that an organisation may spark in its potential supporters and also the logic behind constructing its message. By no means, however, it tries to discount other motivations or models. Rather, it attempts to explain what happened to the people who when asked "what made them join?" could not say anything but that it was "watching their videos" or "deciding spontaneously" like in the cases of one of "jihadi brides", Shamima Begum,[64] or a British fighter Jack Letts,[65] both of whom shocked their families with their decision to leave Britain and join ISIS. The model of emotional choice highlights the fact that people can indeed be "seduced" and bought by propaganda and make the decision that is not based on the existing grievances or problems, but on a sudden instinct.

Notes

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2 Heroes, Princesses, and True Believers
The Images ISIS "Sells"

Previously, I discussed the idea that a brand can create attractive images and then offer them to its target audience. For a brand to be successful, customers should consider these images appropriate and desirable for their identity building. The idea behind the images is simple: when we interact with a brand, it shows us advertising that presents a certain image of our life or of ourselves. Normally, this image is very attractive and even idealised. People buy brands if they like the images they offer and would like to project them. For example, some people may buy Apple products not only because they are very easy and convenient to use, but because of an image of a person that the company "sells": rich, successful, dynamic, creative, modern. Some people are ready to spend a lot of money to buy new versions of iPhone every year, even if they cannot afford it – only because they want to maintain this image. The images should also be vivid enough for people to be able to associate themselves with them and mentally "try them on".

I applied this logic to the analysis of ISIS propaganda. ISIS offers its potential followers certain images that are meant to respond to identity needs and desires of its target audience. Summed up, ISIS's message to its followers is: "with us, you can be a better version of yourself; you can be special, you can be someone you cannot be in your ordinary life". The final goal for ISIS is the adoption of those images by its followers, and their incorporation into their identities.

I conducted the thematic analysis of ISIS's magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* and identified what kind of images the group offers for its recruits and how they are constructed (i.e. what characteristics constitute each image). Importantly, while I am reviewing them separately, they are connected and can be projected by the group as a "package" rather than as individual images.

The first and the most important image that ISIS creates and promotes is *a true believer* or specifically a good Muslim, as I sometimes refer to it. This is a key and the most important concept in ISIS propaganda. While other images may not appear in each and every magazine, an image of "a true believer" is mentioned in all of them. The reason for it is a particularly important role that religion plays in life of many young Muslims even if

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they do not actively practice – very often they are still affected by religious and cultural norms within their families and communities. Indeed, several researchers, for example, Lorne Dawson from the Oxford Research Group, who interviewed Western foreign fighters about their motivations, or Stewart McDonald and Nuria Lorenzo-Duz who analysed ISIS's visual propaganda, showed that an idea of being a better Muslim is important for a large number of ISIS's affiliates.[1]

Indeed, some examples from former ISIS supporters show that an image of a true believer played a significant role for some of the group's recruits. One example of this is Jack Letts, a British convert from Oxford, who travelled to Syria to join ISIS in 2014. Part of a respectable, middle-class family, Jack was a popular child at school and a loving son. Later, he developed obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), which became a serious problem in his ability to study for his A-levels. Around this time, he converted to Islam, which his parents considered a remedy for his OCD, as it helped him to cope with its most severe symptoms.[2]

Jack's parents described him as a pacifist who has never supported violence.[3] However, they claim that once he converted to Islam, he became very scared to be a bad Muslim (although part of this obsession was caused by his OCD) and tried to follow all the rituals to avoid going to hell.

Another example is Tooba Gondal or "the ISIS matchmaker", a young French-born woman of Pakistani origin from East London. During her time at Goldsmiths, University of London, she never displayed any interest in religion and behaved as a secular person going to parties, smoking, and dating. However, two years before ISIS became world-known (2014), she became interested in religion. In her blog, she described a clash with one of the professors over the halal method of slaughtering animals (the professor pointed at the discrepancy between her passionate discussion about Islam and her very un-Islamic behaviour) as a turning point in bringing her back to her religion.[4]

Shortly after that, Tooba met an ISIS fighter online, supposedly became radicalised by him and eventually moved to Syria. There, she became an ISIS poster-girl, who not only publicly praised the group for its attacks in the West but was also grooming other women into travelling to Syria to marry.[5] Just recently, Tooba Gondal has been found in one of the Syrian camps with her two young children, begging to come back to the UK. She now claims that she regrets her decision to join ISIS, that she is now a "changed person"[6]and that she was persuaded that migration to the Caliphate was her "obligation as a Muslim".[7]

ISIS is quite careful in describing its idea of a true believer. In articles related to this concept, there is nothing that any Muslim could argue against. Many recommendations and descriptions are meticulously chosen and based on the Qur'an. Essentially, they do not differ from prescriptions of any moderate Islamic cleric. According to ISIS:

1. A good Muslim does not abandon their fellow Muslims.[8]
2. A good Muslim does not commit adultery and does not sell cigarettes or drugs.[9]
3. Good Muslims are brothers. ISIS advises each of its followers: "Be with them, smile at them, work with them. Don't chase after people's flaws, especially your leader's and your brother's".[10]
4. A good Muslim must fight for Allah's cause – "Allah loves those who fight in his cause in a row as those that are a single structure joined firmly".[11]
5. A good Muslim is pure – they do not follow their sexual desires and do not engage in sexual relations without marriage, nor do they practice "sexual deviances", which are claimed to be typical for the West. ISIS contrasts an idea of a pure and modest Muslim with a perverted "*kuffar*".[12] This can engender a lot of response from some of the young audience. As mentioned, while some young people may fully adopt patterns of Western behaviour, young Muslims who are religious may not feel comfortable in a society where sex is quite accessible and explicit. ISIS, in this sense, gives them a comforting idea, that they are better than their British/Western peers because they remain pure and intact until their marriage.
6. A good Muslim should not worship idols and should remember that Allah is the only God. "Whoever gathers and lives with the mushriks (someone who has multiple gods), then he is like them".[13] ISIS emphasises again and again how important it is to follow Allah's will and do everything to please Him, even if it requires breaking ties with certain people: "A Muslim loves those whom Allah loves and hates whom Allah hates. He forges alliances for the cause of Allah and breaks relations for the cause of Allah".[14] Here, ISIS argues that relationships in the earthly life are not that important; they can never be compared to the relationship a good Muslim has with Allah.
7. A good Muslim must not commit acts of *kufr* (disbelief), as this makes him an apostate. The apostate (*murtad*) concept comes up often in ISIS's texts, as in many Muslim countries, apostasy is considered a serious crime, punishable with death. Most Islamic and non-Islamic researchers emphasise, however, that this practice does not come from the Qur'an, which establishes the freedom of religion. The severe punishment for apostasy came a few centuries later, when Muslims started having more interactions and relations with non-Muslims, and, therefore, a potential danger for a diminishing of the Muslim population emerged.[15] ISIS, however, is trying to give its followers a mindset wherein everything is either black or white: you are either a true Muslim or you are an apostate. Therefore, images created by the group are holistic – they are presented as whole, and you need to meet all the requirements to be a true believer, otherwise you automatically become a sinner. The group underlines that no excuse can justify stepping away from the path of Islam and not carrying out your obligation as a Muslim.[16]

8. Muslims must submit to Allah and His will. ISIS talks about the consequences for those who do that and those who do not. People who do not listen to Allah and do not submit are not real Muslims (thus, deserve death). However, those who do submit will be rewarded after death with Paradise and this Paradise is beautiful. ISIS gives a very specific description in one of its magazines (taken from religious writings), for example, "Allah's Messenger said: Verily in Jannah (Paradise), there are seas of water, honey, milk, and wine, from which the rivers flow".[17] Such a vivid description may be used to show that the award for righteous Muslims is indeed going to be very attractive and worth dying for.
9. A good Muslim should take care of their health, both psychological and physical, as Allah does not favour people who deliberately harm it.[18]
10. Over several magazine issues, ISIS also insists that a good Muslim should do hijrah (migrate to the land of Islam), and engage in jihad, which is named "the peak of Islam".[19] The group makes a claim in one of the magazines that even if its potential followers were bad Muslims in the past, hijrah would purify them.[20] This is a powerful promise for all those who may feel guilty about living in the West and not feeling "Muslim enough". ISIS also emphasises that there is little excuse for its followers not to engage in jihad, unless they are women or sick. They must do it as soon as possible, because the enemies of Islam are preparing for an attack.

Sometimes, ISIS refers to a concept of hypocrisy. The group mainly uses this to make those people who deviate from being true believers (e.g. those who do not participate in jihad or stay in the West) feel bad. Thus, ISIS distinguishes between a "true believer" (only those who share their beliefs) and everyone else.[21]

ISIS provides a lot of instructions on how a person can improve their character. For example, in issue four of *Rumiyah*, the group talks about a "blessing in deeds", which aims at encouraging people to do something good – to keep family ties, spend money on charity, forgive people.[22] The group also talks about the merit of fasting. It discusses how its followers can spend Ramadan with the best outcome for their soul and please Allah (praying, committing good deeds, being pious). The group reiterates that people's life on Earth is not important; only the afterlife matters. So, they do not need to think about material things; they need to think about their souls. Here, one can notice a reference to an idea of success in life and the meaning of a successful person. A classic idea of a successful person in Western understanding is normally someone who has a good career, a good education and a high standard of living. According to ISIS, a really successful person is one who was good in their daily life and who will go to Paradise afterwards. The group, therefore, stresses the importance of morality over material success, which makes it harder to argue against. It can also be linked to the socio-economic situation in the community of Muslims in the West. Some people may be poor or may

not be able to obtain education, which could look like a failure in society. This idea can be quite comforting for those who may not be particularly successful in material world. If previously they may have been concerned over their inability to succeed, ISIS gives them a much more positive vision: yes, you may have not earned a lot of money or built a career, but you can still be a successful person by improving your character. ISIS gives its supporters an opportunity to feel superior – not through the "earthly possessions" but through their high moral qualities.

The group also argues that this superiority should be strictly guarded. True believers should be careful about whom they interact with, as it may negatively affect them: "Living among the sinful kills the hearts, never mind living among the kuffar!"[23] ISIS, therefore, draws a clear line between moral Muslims and sinful Westerners, again emphasising that the former are morally superior.

As one can see, most of the directions regarding how to be true believers do not have violent or aggressive aspects. It is quite the opposite; the group expresses a surprising peacefulness and even love to all human beings if they are "good Muslims". When one reads those directions, it looks like advice on personal development rather than terrorist propaganda. An image of a true believer appeals to an idea of an absolutely perfect, moral person, who stands above the rest of humanity. This explains why one would be attracted to the ideas spread by ISIS – they are not about violence at first place. Rather they are about lifting a person at the moral pedestal that is unavailable for other people.

However, of course, we know ISIS for its calls for violence and gruesome acts against those who do not support their ideology. These more violent and aggressive ideas are not "thrown" at the audience straightaway; they are presented as a natural part of this moral journey of a person. The ideas about jihad and joining ISIS are introduced quite carefully and talked about as a must-have attribute of a true believer. For example: "Revival of the Khilafah gave each individual Muslim a concrete and tangible entity to satisfy his natural desire for belonging to something greater" and then later, "Either you are with the crusaders or with Islam".[24] The images that the group promotes are, therefore, holistic – the main idea that ISIS attempts to render is that if someone likes the image of a morally superior person, than they should also accept the fact that it also requires them to accept its violent side.

At the same time, the group also deliberately makes the image of a true believer look easily achievable, which is one of the tools that a brand would use in its advertising.[25] The group is very specific about what one should do to be a good Muslim, and also presents the advice in a very "digestible" way, so that even people who are not very familiar with Islam could understand and follow it. A lot of directions are presented in the form of short and concise diagrams, to make them really easy for the followers to remember and follow. All directions could also be easily summarised in short and clear rules. What is important here is that while this image has a strong connection with

religion, many of the guidelines are quite generic and can be attributed to just being a good person (e.g. support each other, be kind, be generous). The advice ISIS gives to its supporters in different settings might be well be given by a psychologist or a personal coach. What it means is that even if a person is not particularly religious, they may still be able to find something attractive in the ISIS message – for example, how to be successful, how to be likable, among other attributes. As I tried to show, the group presents the idea of a "true believer" not only through the religious references but also through the idea that being Muslim is a cultural and moral characteristic that distinguishes their community from the rest. Thus, even if a person may not feel the religious urge, they may still be attracted to the Muslim cultural and moral uniqueness that ISIS presented in this image and be willing to become one of them.

Other images discussed here are also quite tightly linked to an idea of being a true believer, which is the main image projected by ISIS. It would even be correct to say that all images reviewed further just constitute one united image of a role-model Muslim according to ISIS. However, I decided to review these images separately. First, I attempted to control for ISIS's audience's varied backgrounds and motivations (e.g. some people could have been more interested in looking more masculine rather than more religious). Second, while they do constitute a holistic Muslim identity, they nevertheless have certain peculiarities that should be taken into account (for example, gender differences). Third, some people may draw selectively on these images: for example, a person may consider themselves to be a true believer, but an image of a superman adds some additional excitement and an "embellishment" to their existing identity.

The second most prominent image in ISIS propaganda is *superman.* This image is essentially based on the image of mujahid (a holy warrior). However, as I mentioned earlier, I decided to give it a different name to emphasise an imaginative nature of this image as well as elements of fantasy and supernatural that are engrained in it. According to ISIS, the main idea of being a mujahid is being a real, strong, brave man. Again, the group offers its audience a way to create a better version of themselves – who among young boys did not dream to become a superman once? Indeed, some researchers, such as Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger or Scott Atran and Erin Marie Saltman, argue that the thrill and excitement in becoming a mujahid, a fighter, did drive a number of young people to ISIS.[26] In its texts, ISIS places mujahideen at the top of the hierarchy – they are the best of all good Muslims and "their deeds are multiplied in blessings".[27] The reason is that they fight for Allah and His cause and are ready to spill their blood for Him. For example: "Mujahideen are the sons of the generous ummah, those who have left their tribes, those who bring victory to Allah and His Messenger."[28] Mujahideen are presented as brothers and they take care of each other, and they "sacrificed all that is dear and precious, offered their souls without hesitation",[29] and made their mission to establish the law of Allah on Earth.

While, as mentioned, this image is tightly linked to Islam and being a good Muslim, it can be appealing to a larger audience, comprising those who may initially not be that interested in religion. Similar to the image of "true believer", "superman", as I already mentioned, possesses characteristics that are attractive for everyone. This image adds an air of adventurism, bravery and exceptionalism to normal and, for some people, boring lives. It allows a person to feel like a character in a movie who fights against an enemy and always wins. The image is presented as possessing all best characteristics as one can think of: in the magazines one can find a lot of pictures with strong, handsome, muscular men who either fight the enemy fearlessly or rest among their brothers who share true, deep male friendship, the strongest and the most precious. Therefore, some people may become attracted to characteristics of this image, and then they adopt a more religious approach as a necessary requirement to become that "superman".

Mujahideen ("supermen") are called "lions", "heroes", and they are unstoppable and invincible. Even though ISIS does not really refer to the term "a real man", being a mujahid is indeed something indispensable in the notion of masculinity for the group. For example:

> How much does the muwahid (monotheist) mujahid has to show off gratitude towards his Lord for having blessed him with Islam and the Jama'ah! If not for Allah, he would be worshipping the tawaghit (idols) of palaces and graveyards. … If not for Allah, he would be an effeminate 'male' having no protective jealousy for his Muslim sisters, a 'male' sitting back along with those have remained behind from jihad.[30]

This equation of a man and mujahid is present throughout all issues of ISIS magazines. It emphasises that Muslim men, warriors, are the protectors of the community, women and children and, most importantly, they are fighting for a greater cause. They are chosen by Allah to fight for Him. So, mujahideen are above all other people; they are the best of the best and indeed have traits of supermen. Moreover, Aniq Zafar notes in relation to this practice of separating between "good" and "bad" Muslims that by giving its supporters rights to determine that the group elevates its recruits to the level of God.[31] They are granted with power, which has almost a supernatural origin, as only Allah can decide the fate of His followers. While it is a clear violation of religious postulates by ISIS, the rationale behind it is clear: the group further enhances the feeling of being special and superior among its followers. As one can see, there is a strong narrative of being special and "chosen", or in other words, being a mujahid is "cool". An idea that a reader of ISIS's magazines can get from it is that if he joins ISIS, he will be better than his peers (who, for example, are not Muslims or do not have an interest in jihad). The followers of ISIS are real men, they are heroes and they are elite of the Muslim community.

While the image of mujahid is mostly aimed at men, one can notice the use of the "superhuman" narrative aimed at women too, which will be discussed later. Altogether, these narratives often supported by visual imagery are aimed to create an impression that ISIS is an elite club, and it is fun to be part of it, so everyone should want to join it. If we step away from the analysis of terrorism ad and think about any kinds of closed clubs or special loyalty programmes some brands offer to their customers, we can easily find similarities: people like feeling special and better than others, and brands know and use that.

Similar to the image of "true believer", the violent aspect is being introduced very cautiously and in the same holistic manner (i.e. if you want to be a super hero, you need to accept the image as a whole). For example, ISIS talks about the obligations of mujahideen and often emphasises that one of the main rules for them is to listen to their emirs and never doubt their excellency. This is a very straightforward way to tell people that they have to listen to what ISIS commanders say, but it seems to work. Again, as with a "true believer", ISIS recruits may just perceive this order as part of the mujahid experience and, therefore, not really become suspicious about it.

Another interesting theme is that the war booty for a mujahid comes up in several magazines.[32] Here, ISIS says that because mujahideen are at war with *kuffar* (infidels), it is permissible and advisable to take their possessions as war booty. Bearing in mind that some of ISIS's recruits have been charged with criminal offences,[33] why they may admire ISIS's propaganda becomes understandable. They are no longer petty criminals; they are warriors who protect the ummah and fight for Allah.[34] They do not steal things from other people; they take what they rightfully deserve. Thus, adopting this image allows the recruits with a criminal past to see themselves in a good light, which would probably not have been possible in their ordinary life.

An ISIS fighter, Shabbaz Suleman, describes the excitement he saw among his peers about participating in jihad. Everyone around him was talking only about the glory of it.[35] In these conditions, as Suleman claims, he felt embarrassed that he was not feeling the same excitement and tried to express more interest in the holy war. This, on the one hand, shows that ISIS fighters indeed become fascinated with an idea of being holy warriors. On the other hand, it liaises in a way with an argument made by Marc Sageman[36] and Quintan Wiktorowicz,[37] who emphasised the role of social connections in the process of radicalisation.

Another angle of the image of a superman is a concept of a martyr. The question here is how could this image (implying that a person is going to die) be attractive to someone and why is it needed? The need to highlight this image resonates with the literature on the strategic logic of suicide bombing.[38] Like any other terrorist group, ISIS needs volunteers who are happy to die for the cause. ISIS presents martyrdom as the greatest reward anyone can look for and the best fate that believers can have, because it is the fastest way

to go to heaven. This is the most noble and beautiful fate one could wish for. It is essentially an "upgrade" and presented as the highest level of moral excellence.

This idea can be noticed in all magazines. ISIS has a special section called "Among the Believers Are Men". The title suggests that while there are good noble people ("believers"), there are even more perfect people among them ("men"). This section tells stories of ISIS fighters who died during military assaults or suicide attacks. The main message of all these stories is the same – the jihadists were very good and nice people, good Muslims, real men, and heroes. After death, they will go to Paradise and will enjoy the mercy of Allah there. "The martyr is given six characteristics: He is forgiven with the first drop of blood, he sees his seat in Paradise, he is made to wear a garment of imah (gift of God), he is married 72 from Hur-al-In, he is protected from the punishment of the grave and he is safe from the great terror".[39] The articles are clearly designed to inspire the readers to follow these examples and fight to death either as a regular soldier or a suicide attacker. Carol Winkler and Jonathan Pieslak, who analysed the narrative on martyrdom in ISIS videos, also highlight the idea that the group gives each recruit who undergoes the training and engages in martyrdom operations an air of a superhuman, who seems to possess superpowers and is almost invincible.[40] The group, in this way, presents itself as able to elevate people to a higher level of development and grant them special powers. Several other researchers also emphasise a special role that the narrative of martyrdom plays in jihadist propaganda. It is presented as the best manifestation of faith and the act that only the best of men are capable of. To support this myth, jihadists (and not only in IS) have a full-fledged ritual to give a farewell to a prospective martyr. He is praised, he is featured in videos and magazines and he is called a hero and a role model for others. The perception of a martyr's special status is, therefore, not only created verbally but also through rituals and practices.[41] Indeed, Jack Letts, mentioned earlier, admitted to a BBC correspondent that he indeed wanted to become a "martyr" at some point to demonstrate his dedication to religion.[42]

Overall, the meaning that ISIS tried to put into images of a superman and a martyr is of an ideal type of a man/person. He is masculine, strong, fearless and flawless. He is successful and admirable. He stands above all other people because he is chosen by Allah. This is an extremely attractive and vivid image, which clearly has a certain charm for some young people still in the process of forming and reconciling their identities, or who, for whatever reason, have struggled with their life in the West.

This idea is reinforced by the image of a *stranger*. While this term may seem to have a negative meaning, ISIS uses it to enhance the feeling of exceptionalism among its followers. It is not uncommon for even the most prosperous and successful people to feel alien to the society in which they live. ISIS content producers tell their audience: you do not have to do it; you must embrace the fact that you are special. For example:

> Strangers are those who break off from their tribes. They are those who left their families and their lands, emigrating for the sake of establishing His religion. They are the most wondrous of the creation in terms of faith and the strangest of them all.[43] ISIS promises that Allah will reward people like this, and they will find a lot of places suitable for living.[44]

In ISIS's narrative, Muslims are "strangers" in Western society, because they are morally superior, they are pure and they worship the real God. They have a mission to fight for Allah. ISIS says to its followers: you do not feel that you belong to this society, and this is right because you are different, you are better. Again, I'll refer to the quote from the previous section:

> Strangeness is the condition that the Muslim living in the West cannot escape as long as he remains amongst the crusaders. He is a stranger amongst Christians and liberals. He is a stranger amongst fornicators and sodomites. He is a stranger amongst drunkards and druggies. He is a stranger in his faith and deeds, as his sincerity and submission is [sic] towards Allah alone.[45]

Another image, which comes up very often in ISIS's magazines, is an image of *a superwoman*. The group provides a lot of directions for "sisters" and dedicates a lot of time explaining for them their roles in fighting for the cause of Allah. Similar to men, ISIS creates an image of an outstanding and extraordinary woman who has an important mission in the society but who also keeps their femininity and grace.

An image of a superwoman is quite complex and even controversial. On the one hand, there is a strong element of traditional understanding of the role of a woman in Islam. In all articles dedicated to women, the group often refers to the Qur'an, which serves as a way to make its claims look credible. Women should be supporters of their men, should follow them on their path of fighting for Allah (which means follow them to ISIS). One of the first addresses by ISIS to women says the following: "Sisters, be [the] base of support and safety for your husbands, brothers, fathers, and sons. Be advisors to them. They should find peace and comfort with you. Be strong and brave."[46] They should "always stay loyal to … [your] husband, make sacrifices for him, and … never give up upon him".[47] Even if a woman's husband decides to have another wife, a good Muslim woman must be patient and supportive of his decision and should obey him.[48]

These ideas of a traditional image of a woman as submissive and a follower were typical in the earlier issues of ISIS magazines; however, later they changed. On the one hand, the conservative agenda remained. Some issues of the magazines would justify the obligation of a woman to always stay inside her house[49] and emphasise her role as a mother. On the other hand, these traditional roles are presented in a way that may make female readers feel empowered and actually playing an important role in jihad and saving the

ummah. For example, motherhood is portrayed as a sacred mission and an important state obligation, which will help "to increase the Muslim population and to strengthen the ummah".[50] Also, a Muslim woman should be submissive to her husband, but her role in the family is very important, and she is "a shepherd in her husband's house".[51] She is in charge of bringing up a new generation of mujahideen, and it is her obligation to make them strong, brave and pious. The children will look at their mother as an example to follow. So, essentially, ISIS makes a claim that it is the women who lay the basis for the happy future of the ummah and for the future of jihad. In addition, the group offers women a lot of social roles that give them an opportunity to be an active part of the society and make a significant contribution to it. They can be not only mothers and wives but members of the morality police, propagandists, interpreters, and doctors.[52]

This brings them to a completely different position in society. Moreover, throughout the magazines' issues ISIS would talk about how women's thoughts and emotions may affect jihad (e.g. "frightening the people of her household or other Muslims, spreading rumours that weaken others, etc.").[53] When it is necessary, ISIS also emphasises that women have free will – the group encourages women to leave husbands who do not share their sympathies for the Caliphate and do not want to migrate with them or those who have decided to escape IS. The group, therefore, underlines that a Muslim "superwoman" should be committed to her mission and her own jihad, and that she is the queen in her house. ISIS twists a traditional (or stereotypical?) understanding of a Muslim woman as submissive, passive and her husband's shadow to a more emancipated idea of a mujahidah. This is one of the reasons why so many girls and young women decided to emigrate to IS. Indeed, according to research by Mah-Rukh Ali from the University of Oxford, ISIS created a precedent with the so-called "jihadi feminism", promising young women not only traditional family and a man who would love them, but also an exciting, adventurous life and their recognition as noble warriors and contributors to the future of the ummah.[54] Many other scholars[55] notice the same pattern in women's motivations to join ISIS. Indeed, an investigation conducted by the *New York Times* into the story of three Bethnal Green girls comes to the same conclusion. It argues that the girls were not simply looking for husbands or families (quoting one of them, Khadiza Sultana, saying, "I am not here [in IS] just to get married"); they were actually seeking to find their more active, powerful selves, being able to contribute to something important and divine.[56]

However, most of the scholars do not pick up on that feeling of moral superiority that can be felt both in propagandist materials addressed to women and in their own discussions on Twitter. Being part of ISIS is not only about emancipation for them; it is about adopting an image of a Muslim "wonder woman", or a "princess" – so different, so beautiful, so strong, so extraordinary compared to other women. This image, therefore, allows young Muslim women to keep their femininity but also their strength.

Having reviewed the images that ISIS offers to its potential, now it is possible to see that each of these images has a particular set of characteristics. Interestingly, as I showed, none of these images are not inherently violent or aggressive. Oppositely, they are presented in a way that may be appealing not just people who are considering to become engaged in any kinds of "terrorist" activities, but to pretty much anyone. Being a true believer or good Muslim is one of the things that a lot of people practicing Islam would look for, feeling like a strong man or beautiful strong woman would likely be among the dreams of at least half of the whole humanity. And putting religion aside – did it not happen to any of us to feel that we do not fit in a group or society and to explain it by "being too good for them"? And did not many of us sometime want to feel special? All these images do not have any extremities and look absolutely mundane – they look attractive and "normal" and are actually quite generic, which suggests that they are constructed in a way to appeal as many people as possible. This is an important remark to make, as previously it has been questioned with surprise how could anyone be attracted to violence and gruesomeness promoted by ISIS? The truth is, as I show here, that violence and gruesomeness are not part of the segment ISIS propaganda aimed at attraction of people. Yes, it does call its supporters to be ruthless towards the enemies; however, this happens only after they become affiliated with the group. The message aimed at those who are still in the state of being recruitment target is different – "look who you can become with us". And similar to any brand, the message resonates. But why? The images discussed here do not seem to be particularly original and could be achieved in many other ways. Why do the images promoted by ISIS did reach out to its audience and convince them that the group is indeed going to give them something particularly special? The next chapter is going to answer this question.

Notes

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3 Narrative Advertising
Selling Caliphate through Stories

In the previous chapter, I argued that ISIS created images that are meant to appeal to as large number of people as possible. However, of course, if this was the only thing that ISIS did in its propaganda, it would either have everyone joining or no one. In addition, of course, the group had to be aware that its "product" (affiliation with them, aka becoming a terrorist or an extremist) has a high price for its potential customers (e.g. the risk to be arrested or killed). As mentioned previously, in cases like these brands need to do something that would make customers suspend their rational judgement that might give them an argument against engaging with the brand. There is a special technique of advertising, which would help overcome people's rational concerns and judgements and encourage them to purchase products not necessarily based on a strong argument in favour but on the strong emotional connection that a brand forms with its target audience. This technique is known as narrative advertising, or more specifically, storytelling.

One of the ways to use it is to construct coherent stories ingrained into the group's propagandist materials. The narrative analysis of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* allowed me to draw the connection between different events, characters, and actions into coherent stories. The analysis of the magazines shows that they contain several coherent stories that re-emerge regularly throughout the issues. I have selected four main stories that can be encountered regularly throughout the magazines (in at least half of all issues/articles). It is important to note that not all of the stories are always developed within one article, but they can develop throughout a magazine's issue. Most often, it is the case that several articles refer to certain parts of a story. Finally, there are articles in the magazines' issues that are constructed according to the classic story format and are used to render a particular idea to the reader. I have given the stories the following titles:

1. Awakening and finding the path to Khilafah
2. Finding mujahid's glory
3. Finding female destiny
4. Remaining and expanding.

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Story №. 1: Awakening and Finding the Path to Khilafah

This story is constructed throughout the magazine issues with the use of articles depicting different stages of a plot, and it appears in 50 per cent of all the magazines. This story can be rendered like this: A Muslim person lives in the West but is constantly suffering; they feel alien there and are unhappy. But then something great happens – the Caliphate is established. The Caliphate shows them that the West is a sinful place, where people are "filthy" and immoral, and this is why Muslims feel alien: they are "strangers" in this sinful world. That is why they need to move to the Caliphate, a place where they can finally feel at home, as it is pure and welcoming and free from sins, and it takes care of the people who live there.

In Polkinghorne's typology, this first story can be characterised as a comedy. While, of course, there is nothing funny in its content, it follows the idea described in his article: it describes how a protagonist overcomes certain obstacles to achieve something and eventually succeeds.

Protagonist: The protagonist in this story is a Muslim living in the West. ISIS rarely associates this image with any physical description of this character, which is understandable: it attempts to appeal to as many people[1] as possible and, therefore, it presents the protagonist in the most generic way. However, when the group describes some of its potential experiences in the West, it becomes much more specific and precise:

> The modern day slavery of employment, work hours, wages, etc., is one that leaves the Muslim in a constant feeling of subjugation to a kāfir master. He does not live the might and honor that every Muslim should live and experience. It is as if Bilāl (radiyallāhu 'anh) never were emancipated to live a free man, the Islamic State of Madīnah were never established, and the verses of jihād, jizyah, and war booty were never revealed upon the Prophet of the Muslim Ummah![2]

Here, one can see how ISIS refers to the experiences of Muslims on the job market in the West, which, despite all visible improvements, remains one of the most problematic areas. Research shows that a Muslim employee is less likely to find a high-skilled job even if their education and experience should enable them to. They also face discrimination and are more likely to reach the "glass ceiling", where their promotion is slowed down or bypassed in favour of non-Muslims.[3] Another topic ISIS often refers to in this narrative is the "sexual deviance" of the West,[4] referring to pretty much everything from sexual relations before marriage to homosexuality. This would appeal to people who come from families where the norms of Islam are followed strictly, where men and women are not allowed to have a relationship before the wedding. This may cause frustration among young people, especially if they want to have marriage based on love – meaning that it may take a long time for them to find "the one".

These are just two examples where ISIS, while presenting its story's protagonist, refers to various negative experiences common to Muslims and offers a comforting solution: an idea of Muslims being "strangers". The concept of a "stranger" appeals to the different and possibly negative experiences of Western Muslims. ISIS, in a way, uses an argument that if used by a non-Muslim person would sound racist: Muslims are fundamentally different from Westerners. They are better, purer, more moral, and more spiritual. They do not feel right where they live, because they deserve a better place:

> Strangeness is a condition that the Muslim living in the West cannot escape as long as he remains amongst the crusaders. He is a stranger amongst Christians and liberals. He is a stranger amongst fornicators and sodomites. He is a stranger amongst drunkards and druggies. He is a stranger in his faith and deeds, as his sincerity and submission is towards Allah alone, whereas the kuffār of the West worship and obey clergy, legislatures, media, and both their animalistic and deviant desires. For them it is strange that one manifests sincere submission to His Lord in word and deed.[5]

This concept represents an interesting paradox: while ISIS victimises Muslims and often refers to their sufferings from Western airstrikes in the Middle East, the group presents this situation as an attempt by "crusaders" to destroy people who are so much more superior than they are.[6] This idea can be summed up in the following quote: "And the kuffār can never be the equals of the Muslims even if both were to come from the same land".[7]

Across the magazines, ISIS also refers to its potential followers' important social connections, such as parents or spouses. The group does seem to be mindful that relatives and social connections may be a powerful reason for its potential followers not to go anywhere. Therefore, ISIS continues using the same idea of superiority in regard to its recruits' inner circle. ISIS emphasises that while each Muslim has an obligation towards their families and parents, they must neglect them if they realise that the latter are lost and cannot be "saved". The group makes it clear that the recruits are so much more morally superior than the people close to them, and thus they cannot stay with them if they prefer to remain oblivious regarding the truth that has been made clear to ISIS recruits.

Plot: The plot of the story consists of two main narratives: awakening and the move (hijrah) to the Caliphate. The first idea was particularly strong in the first three issues of ISIS's magazines, as the group's main purpose was to enlarge its membership:

> The time has come for the Ummah of Muhammad (sallallahu 'alayhi wa sallam) to wake up from its sleep, remove the garments of dishonor, and shake off the dust of humiliation and disgrace, for the era of lamenting and moaning has gone, and the dawn of honor has emerged anew.[8]

Later, the idea of awakening would be rendered through the articles, describing the "deviance" of the West and the obligations of truthful Muslims. The main idea is that a truthful Muslim cannot stay in a land full of sin and disbelief, as it will turn them into a sinner as well:

> Living amongst the sinful kills the heart, never mind living amongst the kuffār! Their kufr initially leaves dashes and traces upon the heart that over time become engravings and carvings that are nearly impossible to remove. They can destroy the person's fitrah to a point of no return, so that his heart's doubts and desires entrap him fully.[9]

A narrative of travelling to the Caliphate has been expressed in several ways. In earlier issues, ISIS tended to use a lot of references to religious texts that served as an inspiration or corroboration of the idea of "hijrah" (migration):

> It is migrating from the places of shirk and sin to the land of Islam and obedience [Ad-Durar as-Saniyyah]. So dārulIslām is the place ruled by Muslims, where the Islamic laws are executed, where authority is for the Muslims, even if the majority of the population are kuffār from ahlul-dhimmah. As for dārul-kufr, this is the place ruled by kuffār, where the laws of kufr are executed, where authority is for the kuffār, even if the majority of the population is Muslim.[10]

Later, the group occasionally started using actual stories that replicated the one I have constructed here: they would be told by people who migrated to Syria and followed the same scheme: awakening, migration, finding the Caliphate. In these stories, the narrator would often describe the difficulties he/she had to overcome to reach the Caliphate (e.g. being detained by Turkish guards or having to travel while pregnant). This narrative resembles many classical storylines: a character has to struggle and experience difficulties to find their happiness.

> My hijrah to the Islamic State was a journey not unlike that undertaken by many others who sought to leave the lands of kufr and reside in the lands of tawhid. I was forced to disavow my strength and ability, and to place my trust in Allah and rely on Him alone in order to find a way out from the dangers and difficulties I faced along the way. [11]

Ending: ISIS continues to follow the classic storyline: the ending of the first story is presented in two ways: in two-thirds of all magazines, there are "reports" from the Caliphate that show the great life people have there, smiling children, joint celebrations and an overall effective ruling by the group within the captured territories. The story of a rightful Muslim who suffered so much in the land of sin and disbelief ends happily in the magic land of true belief and purity:

> The Khilāfah was revived, and muhājirīn were now pouring into Shām from all corners of the Earth at a rate much greater than ever before. One no longer felt the strangeness he would experience in the lands of the crusaders nor that in the lands of the tawāghīt nor that in the territories of the nationalist factions. He now had his own land, where his creed was upheld and his methodology was enforced, the creed and methodology of Islam, the Sunnah, the Jamā'ah. No ikhwānism, no irjā', no hizbiyyah.[12]

Story №. 2: Finding Mujahid's Glory

This is one of the most well-developed stories and it comes up throughout all the issues of the magazines. Here, this idea is expressed via a selection of articles referring to different stages of the plot development: articles about Muslims' lives in the West, the experiences of fighters with ISIS, and practical and moral benefits of being part of the group. ISIS (or rather, unnamed members of the group writing on the group's behalf) eventually also started writing actual stories with the same plot idea, under the title "Among the Believers Are Men" – stories of real fighters who die during military operations or who committed terrorist attacks (or in the group's terms – "martyrdom operations"). The story can be formulated as follows: A young Muslim man leaves a land of disbelief (which can be either the West or a Muslim country), travels to the Caliphate, and becomes a mujahid (jihadist fighter). He fights enemies bravely and dies as a hero. He becomes a martyr and Allah awards him with Paradise.

Protagonist: The protagonist of this story is always a young Muslim man, who either lives in the West and suffers from its immorality and sinfulness, or lives in the Middle East, where he has to deal with hypocrites and apostates. He is always described as a person who has a very good personality, a nice character and, most importantly, is a devoted Muslim.

> Although Abū Qudāmah's joking nature was known to always entertain his brothers, he would take his relationship with Allah very seriously, never missing the fast of Dāwūd ('alayhissalām) nor enjoying a single night's sleep without spending a portion of it remembering his Lord either through prayer or recitation of the Qur'an. He was known to seek the correct Islamic rulings in everything he did, and would never knowingly allow any doubts or falsehood to hold firm in his presence.[13]

Even if the protagonist's past was not quite as religious and pure as the story demands it, ISIS storytellers decorate these facts and make them sound flattering. For example, one of the characters used to be a petty criminal and part of a gang in France. Here is how this aspect of his biography was presented to the reader:

> He was a fierce gangster, who acquired an enormous amount of money through numerous raids on the wealth of the mushrikin, until he obtained

> a beautiful car, and began to join Paris's rich and famous in their clubs and celebrations, and that is the highest achievement for individuals of that diseased world. He was a man whom people would fear, as he was known amongst his peers as brave and fearless, and that he wasn't afraid of confrontation, nor would he run from a fight, especially in the ongoing and never-ending strife between the vile neighborhoods – in the gloom of jahiliyyah – of France's suburbs.[14]

There is a big emphasis on the role of social connections between the protagonist and his "brothers". An idea of kinship and brotherhood is extremely strong in these kinds of stories: the protagonist is always depicted as part of the group of other young men who follow the principle "All for one and one for all". It is particularly visible when there are descriptions of battles of various kinds: very often, a mujahid becomes a hero not only because he is eager to fight for Islam but also because he tries to save his brothers from being killed. Alternatively, his "brothers" attempt to save him against all odds:

> The sniper was not shooting, so the mujāhidīn knew it was an old technique to draw in a medic and get more kills. Abū Qudāmah didn't care. He said, "Well we have to do something, we can't just leave him there. You guys cover me and I'll go get him".[15]

So, a typical character in this kind of story is very likeable: he has a good nature, he is a good friend, he is brave, and loved by everyone. At the same time, he is depicted as special because he was blessed with his belief and devotion to Allah, and this distinguishes him from all other people who were around him in this country of residence. Through his experience, ISIS also renders again an idea that the West (or other Muslim countries) is not the right place for true believers: the group uses examples of these real people to make them as relatable as possible to its potential recruits, and to spark the seed of recognition, doubt, and eventually desire to join the group.

Plot: The plot of this story is quite simple. The protagonist realises that as a devoted Muslim he must migrate to the Caliphate. He becomes a mujahid and fights for Islamic State and Islam. He fights heroically, crushing all enemies of Islam but eventually some crafty enemy reaches him and dishonestly kills him. These events are always described very dramatically, and create an impression of an adventure novel where emotions are very high:

> Prior to heading out for the inghimāsī operation, Abū Jandal wrote the following letter to his brothers in Islam: … "This is a sincere message from your beloved brother living in the blessed lands of the Islamic State. Verily it is Allah's laws and the sacrifice of the brothers that makes a land blessed. Yā ikhwānī fillāh, four or five months ago I was in the same position as you. I didn't have any plan as to how to avoid the fitnah

> surrounding me. I didn't know how I would ever be able to do jihād fī sabīlillāh. I thought that all my family and friends would boycott me. I was drowning in the same obstacles that you might be going through now. But it is only the promise of Allah, the promise of that Garden in which rivers flow, that kept me going. And it was enough, inshā'allāh".[16]

As mentioned, usually at this moment, there will be a strong emphasis on brotherly connections between mujahideen: these stories portray ISIS fighters somewhat as musketeers, who always support each other. As many scholars have shown in previous research, social connections are a very important driving factor for terrorists,[17] so it is not surprising that ISIS makes such a strong emphasis on that. In addition, however, one can notice again an idea of exclusivity being rendered throughout these stories: mujahideen are not simply brotherhood; this is brotherhood that is very special and united, due to their exceptional personal characteristics and a special call from Allah, who "chose" them to serve Him and fight for His cause.

> It is important to remember that the mujāhidīn are from the people with the most proper creed, especially concerning Allah's names, attributes, and actions. Because their creed is that of Ahlus-Sunnah, they believe that Allah's actions are truly characterized by justice, wisdom, mercy, and grace, contrary to the Ashā'irah who believe that wisdom "limits".[18]

Ending: This story has a predictable end. The glorious mujahid dies like a hero, but his death is rewarded by the great mercy from Allah. He is given Paradise and eternal happiness. Often, a picture of a dead body of a fighter is attached and one can see a happy smile on his face, which is claimed to be proof that the fighter is now in a better place. Therefore, this type of a story can also be characterised as comedy according to Polkinghorne's typology: even though the story describes the death of the protagonist, death is presented as a happy end, something that the protagonist was actually striving for all that time.

Story №. 3: Finding Female Destiny

At a certain point, ISIS realised that the Caliphate needed women in order to survive, and from that moment, its propaganda machine started targeting potential female recruits. For them, the group introduced a special column in which it would discuss issues relevant to women. One can notice that all these articles are also constructed as a story; however, it is less developed and nuanced than the stories aimed at men or the general population of believers (such as the first story, which can be relevant to both men and women). Nevertheless, it is present in 80 per cent of all the issues. Its content is quite simple: A woman is a misfit in her country of residence (usually, it refers to the West), because women there have forgotten their female identity. But in

the Islamic State, she finds her real feminine destiny and the treatment she deserves.

Protagonist: Again, as in the previous cases, ISIS is very generic regarding the main character and, in this case, refers to her as a Muslim woman. This is understandable as, similar to other stories, the group attempts to appeal to as many potential followers as possible. It mainly does this by describing the feelings that young Muslim women living in the West may have, and also through an idea of what a "good Muslim woman" should be. The first narrative mainly refers to the so-called sexual freedom of the West, which ISIS presents as deviance and sin.

> And as the fitrah continues to be desecrated day by day in the West and more and more women abandon motherhood, wifehood, chastity, femininity, and heterosexuality, the true woman in the West has become an endangered creature. The Western way of life a female adopts brings with it so many dangers and deviances, threatening her very own soul. She is the willing victim who sacrifices herself for the immoral "freedoms" of her people, offering her fitrah on the altar of secular liberalism. If she feared for her soul, she would reflect on where the paths of Christian paganism and democratic perversion continue to lead her, contemplate on how the world would have been had its women adopted the path of the vile West centuries ago, and liberate herself from her enslavement to hedonistic addictions and heathenish doctrines. The solution is laid before the Western woman. It is nothing but Islam, the religion of the fitrah.[19]

A good Muslim woman must be pure; she cannot allow the dirt of the society in which she lives to touch her. ISIS makes the same claim in regard to Muslim women as it does about men: they are special, they are not like others and that is why they do not feel right where they live and why they need to be in Islamic State to wholly fulfil their destiny.

Plot: A good Muslim woman then travels to the Caliphate, and this is usually accompanied by great obstacles that she has to overcome, which she successfully does as, despite being delicate and feminine, she is also incredibly strong:

> They are as fragile as glass bottles but their souls are those of men with ambitions almost hugging the heavens. Yes, these are the muwahhidah muhājirah sisters who performed hijrah to the lands of the Islamic State. They inherited this ambition from the Mother of the Believers Sawdah Bint Zam'ah (radiyallāhu 'anhā), the wife of their Prophet (sallallāhu 'alayhi wa sallam).[20]

The plot of the female-oriented story is not as well developed as well as the stories for men, where the reader can actually follow the adventures of

mujahideen fighting against enemies and finding glory in death. Partially, this can be explained by the fact that ISIS was a military organisation, and while female recruits were important, nevertheless, they would not be allowed to fight (at least, not in the early years of the group's existence); consequently, there was not much of a story for them to offer. The group chose a different path and provided a very well-developed ending, which, in the case of the female target audience, represents the benefits they can have while in Islamic State.

Ending: The ending of this story can be formulated as follows: The Muslim woman becomes a "real" woman and obtains everything she deserves: power, respect, influence. Many researchers have pointed at the fact that young women did not travel to ISIS for the sake of finding love,[21] but for the sake of empowerment and finding meaning in life. Indeed, the group gives them that; it offers them an idea of a beautiful princess with a sword: she is feminine, yet she is also strong and powerful and fully equal to men, but has a different function in society:

> How great Allah made these women! They did not sit and cry, lamenting during the hours of hardship and tribulation. Instead, they carried the weight of the religion and the Ummah on their shoulders, helping a husband, inciting a son…[22]
>
> My Muslim sister, indeed you are a mujāhidah, and if the weapon of the men is the assault rifle and the explosive belt, then know that the weapon of the women is good behavior and knowledge. Because you will enter fierce battles between truth and falsehood.[23]

All narratives used in female-oriented stories are, therefore, used to spread a message to Muslim women that they are very important, they are an indispensable part of a new and better future of the community and they play an active part in it. Again, here, the group uses the genre of comedy to demonstrate that if its potential recruits decide to join, only success and happiness await them.

Story № 4: Remaining and Expanding

ISIS dedicated a lot of attention and a large proportion of its magazines' content to this story, and it can be encountered in all issues. It is embodied through several types of articles: description of battles, articles dedicated to malicious deeds of the group's "enemies" (the rest of the world), the stories of other groups recognising its excellence and accepting its superiority. The story can be formulated as follows: ISIS is a righteous state, the only goal of which is to protect the believers, and it is being constantly attacked by enemies who want to destroy it. ISIS fights fiercely, more and more people recognise its status as the protector of believers, and eventually it defeats its enemies.

Protagonist: As is clear from the story's description, ISIS uses itself as the protagonist. It presents itself as the only place on Earth where believers can be protected and respected. Its only desire is to follow Allah's will and its only purpose is to follow His orders.

> Raise your heads high, for today – by Allah's grace – you have a state and khilāfah, which will return your dignity, might, rights, and leadership. It is a state where the Arab and non-Arab, the white man and black man, the easterner and westerner are all brothers. It is a khilāfah that gathered the Caucasian, Indian, Chinese, Shāmī, Iraqi, Yemeni, Egyptian, Maghribī (North African), American, French, German, and Australian. Allah brought their hearts together, and thus, they became brothers by His grace, loving each other for the sake of Allah, standing in a single trench, defending and guarding each other, and sacrificing themselves for one another.[24]

This is the only type of story that also has an antagonist: the West (*kuffar* or crusaders), hypocrites and apostates (Muslims who do not support ISIS). Interestingly, the group focuses less on developing its own character than on developing the character of the antagonist. This latter is described as a hostile power that hates everything that is holy and pure, hates and disrespects Allah, and its only purpose is to kill, torture and humiliate Muslims (because they know that they are much better people), and destroy the Caliphate as a stronghold of true faith.

> So the kuffār – whether they are Catholic, Protestant, or Orthodox Christians, whether they are Orthodox, Conservative, or Progressive Jews, whether they are Buddhists, Hindus, or Sikhs, whether they are capitalists, communists, or fascists – they are ultimately allies of one another against Islam and the Muslims. This is because Islam – the religion of truth and fitrah – is the greatest threat to their religions of falsehood, all of which are at war with the inborn nature of man. This is also because the tawāghīt and dajājilah (plural of dajjāl) of these false religions fear losing control of their flocks of blind sheep and the wealth contained in their wooly pockets.[25]

ISIS, therefore, emphasises the crucial difference between it, its supporters, and the rest of the world: again, one can notice the narrative of exclusivity and specialty being used very often to depict the struggle between itself and the rest of the world.

Plot: The "enemies of Islam", therefore, do everything to attack and destroy Islamic State. However, the truth reveals itself: more and more people join the "Khilafah", and it is fighting with fearlessness. The enemies also only look strong, but in reality, since they are not supported by Allah, they display their weakness:

> The crusaders will ultimately find they cannot face the Islamic State except directly, face-to face, or else – due to their nonstop bleeding – the crusaders will be forced to disengage from their war against the Muslims until the time decreed by Allah for al-Malhamah al-Kubrā.[26]

Ending: All of these fierce battles end, of course, with the victory of Islamic State. The fighters of ISIS are supported by God and this will give them almost a supernatural power, making them invincible and unstoppable when it comes to eliminating the enemy.

> Only a month after a much-vaunted "victory" in Bījī against the mujāhidīn, the Safawī forces found themselves being chased out of the very town that they falsely claimed to have completely liberated.[27]

It is interesting to note that when ISIS started losing on the battlefield, its rhetoric changed slightly, but not much. The main change in the story was an idea that victory comes to the patient, and Allah is testing them in their resilience and devotion.[28] When it became clear that the victory was not going to happen, the group started resorting to twisting the facts, trying to present losses as victories (for example, with the battle of Falluja). Another alternative trope the group used was describing its losses in the most dramatic ways, often through fighters' testimonies (e.g. the battle of Mosul), which emphasised the narrative of the righteous being brutally attacked by the enemies of Islam. Here, one can see how the group moved from the genre of comedy to tragedy (an untypical genre for ISIS), to use it to reinforce sympathies for the group, and make its cause stronger through reference to its losses.

As discussed earlier, the benefit of narrative advertising is that it encourages the target audience to "get lost in the story". This means that customers (or in this case, potential recruits) will apply the narrative from the stories to their own experiences and associate themselves with them. Stories offer something valuable for customers – for some people, it can be success, for others, adventure and for others again, love.

The examination of the four ISIS-produced stories shows that the group had, indeed, a very wide reach. It spoke to a large audience of Muslims, particularly those living in the West, and appealed to experiences almost every person may have had – discrimination, anger over the events that happen in the Middle East, difficulties in finding a job, etc.; this concurs with a great deal of existing research.[29] ISIS, therefore, used a popular storytelling trope, in which the narrator starts off with a description of a protagonist's sad and meaningless or unhappy life. The group positioned itself as a way to change this situation and give its followers what they desire. The stories discussed above have several recurring themes that serve as "hooks" for its followers (i.e. things that grasp their attention and appeal to their inner desires), and facilitate a strong connection between them and the group:

1. The feeling of exclusivity and specialness
   In all stories, ISIS again strongly emphasises the fact that Muslims, and particularly those Muslims who support the group, are unusual, special, not like other people. They are better than people in the West and they are better than their fellow Muslims, as they are true believers, unlike those fellow Muslims who mix Islamic principles with a Western lifestyle, or who neglect their obligations. They are also better citizens (in a general sense) as they, unlike other Muslims, feel the pain of the "ummah" (global Muslim community) and want to do something to change the life of their co-believers for the better. There is also a strong emphasis on the "strangeness" of these people: as shown in stories, ISIS always stresses how the exceptional moral characteristics of those Muslims who support its principles make them misfits in society. This idea goes hand by hand with an idea of "chosen-ness", which is particularly prominent in the stories about mujahideen. Here, one can also see the role of the narrative of brotherhood and special bonds. As ISIS followers are special, they can only be understood by other special people. They can only be themselves among their "brothers and sisters". Their relationship is then deep and strong, their devotion to each other is exceptional, and thus "ordinary people" will not get it.
2. The moral transformation
   This is also a typical story trope that "hooks" a lot of people. We tend to like stories in which a good but awkward character, who is not liked or appreciated by those around them, changes dramatically and then impresses everyone with their new physique, skill, job or knowledge. Or, alternatively (and this seems to be the ISIS choice), the character takes revenges on everyone who did not treat them well before. The same logic works in the ISIS stories. In the first three stories, there is a narrative of humiliation and the lack of appreciation that Muslims experience all over the world, and particularly in the West. Joining ISIS in this sense is portrayed as a gateway for this transformation. Muslims are offered a chance to take up the place that they deserve, to take revenge for mistreatment, and also – for particularly special people – to gain the highest reward, which is Paradise. As the group states: "This revival of the Khilāfah gave each individual Muslim a concrete and tangible entity to satisfy his natural desire for belonging to something greater".[30]
3. Superpower
   This idea is particularly strong in the stories about mujahideen and ISIS's struggle against the enemies. The group presents its fighters and itself as a very powerful agent, possessing almost supernatural skills that are given them by Allah. These skills make them invincible, unstoppable, scaring the enemies almost by the very appearance of them alone. This narrative has a parallel with superhero stories, in which the characters are given special powers to fight against evil and save the world. In these stories, good always wins, even if it experiences difficulties, and there is always a

happy ending. The same applies to ISIS: it tries to make its followers feel like superheroes who have not just escaped their lives because they were unsatisfied with them and could not adjust to the society they live in, but were called upon for a special mission, because only they have the power to perform it. Here, the idea of exclusivity plays out as well – being part of ISIS is presented as being part of a secret club like the Marvel comic "Avengers", the members of which may not be understood by the general public due to its narrow-mindedness, but who are, nevertheless, secretly working towards a greater good.

4. The strength in femininity
   While previous "hooks" can be relevant to both men and women, this one is specifically for women. It is about the idea that a woman can maintain her femininity and, at the same time, be powerful. Of course, this is possible outside ISIS; however, for many young Muslim women, there are more obstacles to that: they are often forced to choose whether to adopt Western values and give up on some of their cultural and religious norms, or resort to following their traditional role, as required by their family, for example.[31] ISIS offers them both. The group emphasises the fact that a Muslim woman is, first of all, a woman, meaning that she is beautiful, tender, delicate and soft – like a princess from a fairytale. She is also unique and special (unlike Western women or other "bad" Muslims), and, like a beautiful flower, she should be guarded and also restrain herself from some rough male jobs (e.g. fighting). At the same time, despite being very feminine and fragile, she is enormously strong, she is a superwoman, as she is involved in crucial activities, helping to build the Caliphate and a happy future, and she is also the queen in her husband's house. It is she who defines the success of her husband on the battlefield, she is the one who will give birth and bring up the future generation of glorious fighters, she is the one who rules the house and her husband is aware of her power. So, SIS offers its female recruits an idea of a typical Disney princess, who is 100 per cent feminine but, at the same time, unlike other women, possessing some special characteristics, power and influence that make her unique.

These four "hooks" transmitted through the ISIS stories make its followers, in a manner similar to a brand's customers, absorb the group's narrative, become fascinated with it, allow themselves to dream about the ideal image that the group offers them, and form a strong emotional connection with it. As I mentioned previously, none of these feelings are based on rational argumentation but purely on the feeling that becoming part of "the ISIS family" (joining the Caliphate) would indeed transform these people from "ordinary" to "special". While I did not attempt to identify who exactly the target audience of this type of message was, it would probably be correct to think that it would work better with younger people, who are still concerned with self-expression. This happens as ISIS offers them something extremely attractive

and desirable, which speaks directly to their personalities. These "hooks" appeal to the recruits' psychological needs, such as self-image and self-perception, rather than to their political and/or socio-economic grievances. As with other brands, for some of the people among the group's target audience, this connection becomes strong enough to make a decision whereby they want to make the story a reality.

Notes

1 It should be noted, however, that when we say that ISIS tries to appeal to 'all Muslims', it normally means Sunni Muslims; Shiites are considered enemies.
2 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. A Call to Hijrah', *Al-Hayat Media Center,* no. 3 (Shawwal 1435): 29.
3 See Anushka Asthana, 'Islamophobia Holding Back UK Muslims in Workplace, Study Finds,' *The Guardian*, 7 September 2017, www.theguardian.com/society/2017/sep/07/islamophobia-holding-back-uk-muslims-in-workplace-study-finds; Sundas Ali, *British Muslims in Numbers* (London: The Muslim Council of Britain, 2015), 63; Claire L. Adida, David D. Laitin and Marie Anne Valfort, *Why Muslim Integration Fails in Christian-Heritage Societies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 14.
4 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. From Hypocrisy to Apostasy', *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no.7 (Rabi Al-Awwal, 1436): 42.
5 See Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. The Failed Crusade', *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no. 4 (Dhul-Hijjah, 1434).
6 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. The Law of Allah or the Laws of Men', *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no. 10 (Ramadan, 1436): 15.
7 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. Shar'iah Alone Will Rule Africa', *Al-Hayat Media Center*, no. 8 (Jumada Al-Akhirah, 1436): 4.
8 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. The Return of the Khilafah', Al-Hayat Media Centre, no.1 (Ramadan, 1435): 9.
9 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. A Call to Hijrah': 31.
10 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. Shar'iah Alone Will Rule Africa': 32.
11 Islamic State, '*Rumiyah*', Al-Hayat Media Centre, no. 13 (Dhul-Hijjah, 1438): 30.
12 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. Just Terror': 33.
13 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. From Hypocrisy to Apostasy': 47.
14 Islamic State, '*Rumiyah*', Al-Hayat Media Centre, no. 11 (Shawwal. 1438): 45.
15 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. From Hypocrisy to Apostasy': 48.
16 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. The Murtadd Brotherhood', Al-Hayat Media Centre, no.14 (Rajab, 1437): 51.
17 Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 63; Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 117; Quintan Wiktorowicz, 'Joining the Cause: Al Muhajiroun and Radicalism', *Department of International Studies, Rhodes College*, (2003): 3–5.
18 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. The Flood', Al-Hayat Media Center, no. 2 (Ramadan, 1435): 23.
19 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. Break the Cross', Al-Hayat Media Centre, no. 15 (Shawwal, 1437): 25.

20 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. Shar'iah Alone Will Rule Africa': 34.
21 Hind Fraihi, 'The Future of Feminism by ISIS is in the Lap of Women', *International Annals of Criminology* 56 (2018): 28; Alice Martini, 'Making Women Terrorists into "Jihadi Brides": An Analysis of Media Narratives on Women Joining ISIS', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11, no. 3 (2018): 469; Galit M. Ben-Israel, 'Telling a Story Via Tumblr Analytics: Europe's Young Muslim Female Attraction to ISIS', *International Annals of Criminology* 56 (2018): 62.
22 Islamic State, '*Rumiyah*', Al-Hayat Media Center, no. 2 (Maharram 1438): 30.
23 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. From the Battle of Al-Ahzab to the War of Coalitions', Al-Hayat Media Center, no. 11 (Dhul-Qa'dah, 1436): 44.
24 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. Shar'iah Alone Will Rule Africa': 4.
25 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. Just Terror', Al-Hayat Media Center, no. 12 (Safar, 1437): 44.
26 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. They Plot and Allah Plots', Al-Hayat Media Center, no. 9 (Sha'ban,1436): 59.
27 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. Al-Qa'idah of Waziristan: A Testimony from within', Al-Hayat Media Center, no. 6 (Rabi Al-Awwal, 1436): 32.
28 Islamic State, '*Rumiyah*', Al-Hayat Media Center, no. 2 (Maharram, 1438): 26; Islamic State, '*Rumiyah*', Al-Hayat Media Center, no. 4 (Rabi al-Awwal 1438): 28.
29 Fawaz A. Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 190; Anne Speckhard and Ahmet S. Yayla*, ISIS Defectors. Inside Stories of the Terrorist Caliphate* (McLean: Advances Press, LLC, 2016); Shane Brighton, 'British Muslims, Multiculturalism and UK Foreign Policy: "Integration" and Cohesion in and Beyond the State', *International Affairs* 83, no. 1 (2007): 13; Moamen Gouda and Marcus Marktanner, 'Muslim Youth Unemployment and Expat Jihadism: Bored to Death?' *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no.10 (2019): 879.
30 Islamic State, '*Dabiq*. From Hypocrisy to Apostasy', Al-Hayat Media Center, no. 7 (Rabi Al-Akhir, 1436): 57.
31 See Mariam Khan, *It's Not About the Burqa: Muslim Women on Faith, Feminism, Sexuality and Race* (London: Picador, 2019); Heidi Safia Mirza and Veena Meetoo, 'Empowering Muslim Girls? Post-feminism, Multiculturalism and the Production of the "Model" Muslim Female Student in British Schools', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 39, no. 2 (2018): 233; Katherine Brown, 'British Muslim Women: Islamic Identity and Strategies for Acquiring Rights in the UK', *Ḥuqūq-i Bashar* 10, no. 2 (2015): 39.

4 Falling in Love with the Caliphate

Self-Illusion and Immersion into the Imaginary World

As demonstrated in the previous chapters, ISIS deliberately nurtured its recruits' motivation to join the group by offering them attractive new identities. Now, it is time to turn to ISIS's supporters and look at how exactly the techniques used by ISIS affect its target audience: Do they really adopt the images promoted by the group? And can we find evidence for potential supporters of ISIS becoming carried away by the fantasy?

Before turning to the discussion, it is necessary to say a few words about how exactly the process of the image adoption and fantasy immersion happens. A customer makes a decision about whether to choose a brand through the prism of self-focus and self-illusion. Self-focus refers to how buying that brand makes them feel and look (i.e. a customer "tries on" the images promoted by the brand). Self-illusion signifies the immersion into the world created by the brand and means that a customer suspends rational judgement and creates their version of reality. If this happens, it would mean that customers form an emotional connection and eventually a preference for the brand. This process has some further peculiarities: the preference is formed holistically (i.e. not only a brand offers customers wholesome images, but they also evaluate their relationship with a brand as a whole, looking at their overall image and feeling, rather than dividing them into separate elements). The adoption of images can also be expressed and reinforced through non-verbal imagery, that is, pictures that will visualise an image a customer wants to achieve or express their vision of themselves with a newly adopted image (e.g. profile pictures or sharing relevant thematic pictures). Finally, this connection can not only be expressed through referring to what a customer likes about the brand but also to something they dislike – for example, "Apple is a brand for young people, not like that old-fashioned Microsoft" (aka "refusal of other tastes").

Now I am going to look at the community of ISIS fans and examine whether they indeed demonstrate the adoption of the images promoted by the group and whether one can say that they did find themselves immersed in a certain world of fantasy. I will examine the ways in which ISIS's followers describe themselves and/or ISIS in relation to a particular image that the group was promoting. I will also examine how they view the others (e.g.

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the West or other Muslims) to show elements of the refusal of other tastes. While these processes are happening in a person's mind, it is nevertheless possible to depict signs of them on social media, by looking at the ways (terms, metaphors) in which users describe themselves and ISIS. This will demonstrate how the ISIS's target audience feels about the images promoted by the group and what effect they have on them.

The Images of a True Believer (Good Muslim), Stranger, Martyr

Generally, the image of a good Muslim coincides with the one offered by ISIS, which is a very strict, Salafist interpretation of Islam.[1] ISIS followers express their feelings about being a true believer in several ways.

First, they post a lot of religious quotes. Similar to ISIS's propagandist magazines, most of them are very innocent and just give recommendations on how to be a better person and a better Muslim, often referring to the Qur'an and Hadith or Islamic scholars, and are often just retweets from groups for Muslims who do not have any extremist ideas. For example:

> La tahzan innallaha ma'ana / Don't be sad. Allah is with us.[2]
> Muhammad cooked, cleaned, and took the trash out.
> Your wives aren't your maids.
> They are your partners. Be like Muhammad.[3]

This shows again the peculiarity that I noted in the previous chapters – most of ISIS's propaganda and consequently the rhetoric of its supporters is not about killings or crimes. It is indeed about self-improvement and the ways to please God (the fact that often to please God, according to ISIS one needs to commit violent acts is another question). Islamic quotes are used by ISIS supporters as a means to express their strong religious identity and devotion. On average, there are approximately 20–25 tweets with content like this, and content like this outweighs any other content shared by users. It may serve as a proof that the image of a true believer or a "true believer" seems to be most important for ISIS, and consequently for the group's supporters. At the same time, there are many quotes of radical scholars, for example, Anwar Al-Awlaki, a preacher who was considered an inspirer for Al Qaeda:

> They are asking us to live as sheep, as pleasantly as a flock of tame, peaceful, and obedient sheep. One billion and a quarter Muslims with no say on the world stage, stripped from their right to live as Muslims under the law of Islam, directly and indirectly, occupied by the West, are asked to live as sheep. Is that the role of scholars? [4]

Radical scholars act as powerful inspirers for jihadists of all generations. However, they rarely call to direct violence, presenting themselves as scholars and thinkers rather than fighters.[5] Nevertheless, they provide legitimacy to the

ideas shared by a particular group and justify the actions it undertakes. The quotes from radical scholars are also used to highlight the difference between pious Muslims and *kuffar* (infidels) and often have a mobilisational message (e.g. Muslims should stop tolerating the immorality of the West and should resist).

The quotes that ISIS followers use to express their devotion to religion are often written in a very expressive and exalting manner. It is not uncommon to find phrases like the ones below in ISIS followers' accounts:

> Do you ever sit back and realise how beautiful the word "Allah" is in itself? How it's verbally symmetrical and has the word "All" within.[6]
>
> We sacrifice all that we possess for your sake my beloved o messenger of Allah #OurTeacher.[7]
>
> #WhoIsMohammad I will sacrifice my entire family for him.[8]

One of the most recurring themes is ISIS "love for Allah and the Prophet", how important it is to follow His path and that religion is the most important thing in their life. They emphasise that the earthly life does not matter and that the only moment they are waiting for is when they are reunited with God. Young women often tweet that they want a husband who loves God more than them and is willing to engage in jihad. It is not uncommon to find a tweet like the one below among female ISIS supporters: "My man love [sic] love martyrdom, more than your man love life".[9]

These tweets are often combined with direct advice to their followers. For example, many would address the Twitter community, asking them not to engage with the free mixing of genders online (not to mention in the offline world):

> Annoying when people acknowledge freemixing with opposite gender is wrong but still carrying on lol'ing away and cracking jokes.[10]
>
> Brothers need to fear Allah and stop chatting up sisters, especially if your married, get off twitter and chat up your wife?[11]
>
> Too many "practising" people showing themselves off on social media and making hints about marriage all the time.[12]
>
> Subhaan Allah too much unnecessary chit chat between "practising" people. Fear Allah and guard your honour.[13]
>
> I can see so much fitnah already on twitter why are too many brothers and sisters chatting each other up? Fear Allah.[14]

From the review of the tweets related to religion, it becomes clear that ISIS followers indeed see themselves as very pious, highly moral people, whose only concern is the afterlife and Allah. When reading across different accounts, it is easy to notice the overall tone of pride and even arrogance. ISIS followers find themselves qualified to give other people religious advice and even to criticise them, since they are at a more advanced religious level than the rest of the

Muslim world. They place Islam higher than any other religion. It is quite common to see phrases like "Proud to be Muslim" or "Blessed to be Muslim" on their accounts. As mentioned, ISIS supporters see themselves as better Muslims than an "average" Muslim (i.e. one who does not support ISIS). But at the same time, they also see the overall Muslim community as superior to all other people and religions. While other Muslims may also express their pride and love for their religion, they do not normally present it as being better than any other religion. They would be speaking more about the beauty of Islam in general, rather than trying to downplay the role of other religions. Reading the tweets of ISIS supporters sometimes gives an impression that they almost seem to compete in who would express their love for Allah. This again brings us to the idea that in a certain way, being religious is becoming somewhat of a fashion and an attribute of a style.

The narrative of superiority adds a new angle to the analysis of ISIS supporters' perceptions. Several researchers point at the narrative of victimisation of Muslims in ISIS's propaganda.[15] They argue that this is the main feeling the group capitalises on. Similarly, Farhad Khosrokhavar argued that young Muslims turn to radical Islam when they feel alienated and discriminated by the host society.[16] While this is definitely true, one can also see that ISIS makes its supporters feel good about themselves.

> Tawhid is the maker of men, is the maker of Legends – Shaykh Ahmad Musa Jibril.[17]
>
> We are the ones who care, we the Muslims and Allah is our aid, this is a battle between imaan and kufr.[18]
>
> People who do not care what others think about them. People who do not care about quantity. People who follow Quran and Sunnah. Muwahideen. [19]

Often, this over-emphasised "Muslimness" is also expressed through profile pictures (non-verbal imagery). Some ISIS followers, both male and female, would use pictures that have religious quotes or sites depicted, or would show their attitude to religion. These can be, for example, images depicting green birds (which represent souls of martyrs when they go to heaven), phrases "je suis Muslim et j'aime le Prophet" ("I am Muslim and I love the Prophet" – a clear parallel with hashtag #JeSuisParis trending after the 2015 ISIS attacks) or "Dunya (earthly life) is temporary".

ISIS supporters tend to use a particular set of pictures that reflect their support for the group. This shows the group's attempt to create recognisable symbols that will not only unite its followers but also help them express their new identities in an even more vivid way. By using them as profile pictures, ISIS supporters tell the world that they are devoted believers, and that religion plays the most important role in their life. Again, this refers to the idea that religion does not only (and not always and for everyone) play an ideological role, but here it is indeed part of the identity- and image-building process.

ISIS supporters also position themselves against certain groups. This trend is called "refusal of other tastes" in marketing, when customers tend to choose a brand because they do not like any others. A lot of research has been done on ISIS's attempts to maintain an "us versus them" narrative in relation to its enemies.[20] Research also has shown that ISIS convinces its supporters that it is their obligation as good Muslims to hate and fight against those who do not adhere to "true" Islam.[21] An examination of ISIS followers' accounts shows that a significant part of their rhetoric about "other" groups is presented in the form "we are better than…" (Westerners, Shi'a, Jews), which serves as means to further strengthen their positive self-perception. This is similar to subcultural dynamics – members of a subculture strengthen their identities and their attachment to the group and its characteristics by comparing them to others and concluding that they are "cooler" than "the other".

One of these groups is known as *kuffar* (infidels or disbelievers). Normally, this category included Christians (Westerners) and Jewish people, even though more often they are referred to as "Jews" and not *kuffar*. Moreover, while ISIS's supporters do talk about Jewish people, they do not set themselves against them. The most common rhetoric about Jewish people has to do with Palestine and Israeli soldiers' atrocities against Palestinians. Most often, the concept of "*kuffar*" is perceived holistically as "the West" without making a distinction between people who support Muslims and the ones who are guilty of Islamophobia (e.g. far-right activists). ISIS's supporters make sweeping generalisations about Westerners in the same way that some Western people and media do about Muslims. In the view of ISIS's followers, all Westerners are evil a priori (because they are "disbelievers") and represent a collective idea of what they claim to hate the most: the lack of religiosity, their liberal beliefs, a capitalist-oriented mind-set and the lack of morality. ISIS's supporters draw a clear line between themselves as religious, moral and pious and the sinful *kuffar*. A lot of tweets are either aimed to demonstrate these "sins" or to show the moral gap between ISIS supporters and Westerners. For example:

> The Catholic Church owns a media company which publishes pornography and erotica.[22]
>
> One Muslim prisoner is better than 200 lives of Christian girls… #bringBackOurGirl[23]
>
> Children doing drugs, teachers in our school in United States teaching about sex … Too many problems here.[24]
>
> Why do people love debating with kaffirs and munafiqs etwhat's [sic] the point Allah hasn't guided them, just block them, no point wasting energy.[25]
>
> The difference between us & our enemies is that we are living for Al akhira and they are living for worldly gains…[26]
>
> There are essentially only two drugs that western civilization tolerates: caffeine from Monday to Friday to energize you enough to make

> you a productive member of society, and alcohol from Friday to Monday to keep you stupid to figure out the prison that you are living in. [27]

While it may not be always explicitly stated, the tone of the tweets does suggest that their authors are radically different from the immoral *kuffar*. A quote by Anwar al-Awlaki is widely used to verbally express this difference: "If the West or their slaves are pleased with you then something is seriously wrong with you".[28]

Or their own interpretation of the same idea:

> The disbelievers will try and take you to there [sic] way, they will never be pleased with you until you follow there [sic] ways.[29]

Here, the image of a good Muslim is closely connected with the images of a stranger. ISIS followers adopt both identities and together they make them think that their possible feeling of being alien to Western society is because they are just too good for it. The idea that they therefore adopt is that the West is not a place for a good Muslim, as it is too full of sins and deviance.

An interesting observation can be made in regard to the usage of the term "terrorist". While one would normally perceive the term as negative, the followers of ISIS use it to glorify themselves. For example:

> Dear Muslims you should know that you are a terrorist in the eyes of kuffars the list you could be proud of it.[30]
>
> We are terrorists? Yes, pls. We agree we are terrorists, and we will terrorise you from places you oppress us. U will pay.[31]

The term "terrorist" is considered to have been created and applied uniquely by Westerners to Muslims. The stereotyping and perceived hostility of the West towards Islam and Muslims is considered to be one of the "pull" factors for terrorism.[32] The observation of pro-ISIS social media accounts shows how this frustration over stereotypical views of Muslims evolves into a kind of masochistic pleasure. ISIS supporters now see the negative attitude of the West as flattering, proving that they are righteous Muslims. In such a way, the terms "terrorist" and "terrorism" become not only normalised but also glorified. Being a "terrorist" is becoming something desirable, commendable and again – "cool", which explains why ISIS's designation as terrorist did not scare young people away. Again, one can see a subcultural element here – subcultures are often based on the desire of being against the system, being different and rebellious and young ISIS supporters demonstrate this too.

This normalisation and glorification happen through sharing war-related content. Almost every ISIS supporter tweets or retweets information about the atrocities of the West, Russia, China and even "apostate" Arab regimes towards Muslims. They use a lot of graphic pictures, which may have a strong psychological effect on the viewer. For example:

> Do not name your daughters Aasiya if you are not willing to let her be part of the fight against oppressors #mybeautifulDeen[33]
>
> And so it would be war with the hypocrites and the kufar.[34]
>
> The whole Ummah needs to wake up and join the fight against kuffar scum![35]
>
> Lol I listen to them when I am walking on the street I feel like I am at the battlefield.[36]

So, ISIS followers try to present the group's attacks as happening in the times of war between the West and Islam. Therefore, the civilian logic cannot be applied to assess the actions of "terrorists". Here one can see how ISIS supporters became immersed in an imaginary world, which differs from objective reality. Graphic pictures together with a persistent war-mongering narrative indeed create an impression that the West is at war against Muslims. Therefore, their "terrorist" response would be justified and, moreover, required from them if they want to be good Muslims. Another goal for spreading this type of material must be an attempt to spark outrage and desire for revenge. Here, the previously discussed narrative of victimisation shows and it is used to provoke the desire for revenge.[37] At the same time, this type of content may have another purpose. Social media accounts of ISIS supporters show that ISIS supporters see the Muslim community as martyrs due to all the abuses they have to go through. This means they adopted this image promoted by the group. Even if they do not fight and die in Syria, they still feel that they are martyrs because they belong to the community that has to go through many sufferings. For example:

> I am not from Syria, not from Palestine, nor from Afghanistan. But when you bleed, I bleed because we are one Ummah, one Muslim body.[38]

One can also see the role of mass media coverage in supporting this narrative. ISIS's followers often talk about "double standards" employed by the media. For example, one of the recurring themes is how the media labels Muslim people as "terrorists" and Westerners as "gunmen" for the same types of offences. Another one is how the media ignores attacks on Muslims and focuses too much on the attacks on Westerners. In the discussions about media, images, especially political cartoons, are very actively used to show the difference in media attitudes towards Muslims and other people. For example, one picture widely circulated on Twitter with a heading "Double standards in society" depicts four pairs of identically looking people – two old, bearded men, two women (a nun and a woman in hijab), two military men and two children. The difference between pictures is that one person is non-Muslim and the other Muslim. The captions above non-Muslim people say: professor (bearded man), worshipper (nun), hero (military person), future hero (child). The caption above pictures depicting Muslims says "terrorists" on all four pictures.[39]

The pictures present the media as biased, serving the interests of the hostile West and Israel. This portrayal of the media further corroborates the idea of a global anti-Muslim war.

As one can see, ISIS followers share a strong feeling of dislike and frustration towards the West. This feeling again refers to the refusal of other tastes, used by brands to promote its products. As mentioned, ISIS artificially cultivates this feeling of disgust in its propaganda. Then, its followers share the relevant content and they make that feeling even stronger by interacting with each other, repeatedly seeing the same content and getting convinced that they are at war with *kuffar*. What the branding lenses shows is that in addition to traditional war-mongering and revenge narratives, there is also a strong narrative of the moral superiority of the Muslim community (and especially ISIS supporters) over the West.

The question of the Muslim community needs a more detailed discussion. There is an imagined "global ummah" that exists in the minds of extremists,[40] which can be easily observed among the ISIS followers. There seems to be a certain cognitive dissonance in ISIS supporters' perception of it. On the one hand, ISIS supporters see Muslims as a whole. Everyone is part of the ummah. Therefore, when they talk about the "war" against Muslims, it is the war against all Muslims. The sufferings described in many tweets are related to everyone in the community. Most importantly, as mentioned, an idea of the superiority of Islam (and thus of Muslims) seems to encompass all co-believers, so Islam is always better than any other religion. Based on this idea of Muslim superiority, ISIS's supporters sometimes post motivational quotes emphasising the unity of the followers of Islam. An idea of this unity also gives ground to ISIS's claim for building the Caliphate – a state for all Muslims. For example:

> #BeingMuslim is to love your brothers and sisters in Islam and always believe in believers than a kuffar conspiracy.[41]
>
> We have one Allah, one Al-Qur'an, one Prophet, one religion, one direction. Why are we not one #Khilafa? [42]

Such a strong emphasis on unity is also likely to create a feeling of belonging to a global community, where everyone is brothers and sisters.[43] Therefore, each individual follower is no longer alone – they are part of one family that needs to be protected and fought for. This clearly resonates with the argument of many supporters of social networks theory, such as Mark Sageman and Quintan Wiktorowicz.[44] The feeling of belonging, the feeling of brotherhood, also gives further excitement to an idea of being a good Muslim in "the ISIS way". ISIS followers see each other as an elite community of morally perfect individuals. It looks like a club that only accepts the best of the best.

There is, however, a clear tendency to exclude some groups from the global ummah and from this elite club. Indeed, Remy Low argues that the "the Ummah that ISIS speaks of is not the empirical Ummah of the global

Muslim populace as they are, but an empty signifier that seeks to actively produce a collective identity according to its view of the world".[45] Sanjeev Kumar has expressed a similar opinion, emphasising that ISIS's vision of the ummah is based on sectarian divisions and the group's own distorted vision of "pure" Islam.[46]

One group is, expectedly, Shiites. They are as hated by ISIS's supporters as much as the *kuffar*, if not more. While ISIS's followers are very explicit in their feelings towards Westerners, they rarely call them other than "*kuffar*". With Shi'a Muslims, it is different. Offensive words are used very actively, and terms like "dogs", "pigs," and "perverts" are not uncommon in ISIS's followers' vocabulary. The "rejection of other tastes" manifests itself here very evidently too. ISIS supporters always emphasise that Shiites are not "real" Muslims and their religion is not "real Islam". In their opinion, it is sinful, perverted paganism and has nothing to do with their religion. One can often find tweets dedicated to Shiites and their "sinfulness":

> Imam Ibn Taymiyyah(ra) said: Shias are the donkeys of the Jews, in every fitna they ride over them. #shiaisnotislam #shia #Shiite[47]
>
> Subhanna Allah! The punishment of defaming a chaste woman is lashing… The Shia defamed the mother of believers so Allah afflicted them with lashing themselves until the Day of Judgement!![48]
>
> Shia have a belief that 90% of fame should be based on deception.[49]
>
> Shi'a dogs murdering our brothers!! [50]

One popular type of picture – which I do not publish here due to its graphic nature – demonstrates how ISIS's supporters detach themselves (or the ummah in general) from Shiites. These pictures concern a Shi'a way of celebrating Ashura – the day of commemoration of Mohammad's grandson's martyrdom. On the day, Shi'a Muslims engage in self-flagellation by lashing or cutting themselves. Even children are subjected to this procedure, though in a lighter form. As the Qur'an forbids self-harm, this practice is quite controversial and contested, even among Shi'a imams. Despite that, ISIS supporters see this practice as representative of Shiites' way of life and refer to it to corroborate their vision of Shiites as "non-Muslims". One particularly popular image on this topic is a collage where, on the top, one can see crying children covered with blood and the caption "This is Shi'a Islam" (or in another version, "This is Islam that Iran promotes") and, on the bottom, happy smiley children and a caption saying "The real Islam".[51]

Similar to the concept of "*kuffar*", ISIS supporters not only criticise Shiites to legitimise the group's violence against them, they also further strengthen their feeling of being better (perfect) Muslims than them, thus also strengthening their newly acquired identity.

Another exclusion concerns "moderate" Muslims or "coconut Muslims" as ISIS supporters tend to call them. This term stands for Muslims who are "brown on the outside and white inside", that is, who look like Muslims

but share liberal/Western beliefs.[52] In reality, this term has a much broader meaning and encompasses everyone who does not share the ideas of ISIS supporters. There is the whole guide on how to identify a "moderate"[53] (i.e. coconut) circulated online:

How to identify a moderate:

1. Itaqillah is an insult.[54]
2. Listening to music is somewhat OK.[55]
3. Jihad does not have a place in the 21st century.[56]
4. Living under demoscracy [sic] is freedom.[57]
5. Applying shariah in the 21st century is toatelly [sic] backwards.[58]
6. It's OK to delay salah for a movie/Facebook,/friends e.t.c.[59]
7. You start practicing when you get old.[60]
8. Claims to love Allah and the prophet (s.a.w.) but do everything they forbade you.[61]
9. They are soft to Kuffar of America, etc. and hard to the ones who defend their religion.[62]
10. Reading a 600-page novel makes you concentrate more than reciting surahtul-iklas.[63]
11. Having a boyfriend/girlfriend is okay as long as you don't get to do anything haram looool.[64]
12. It's okay to snitch on your Muslim brother/sister and give their info to the kufars if they are extremist.[65]

As one can see from the guide, even simply expressing support for people in the West or enjoying a book already excludes a person from the circle of the righteous. In the tweets shown above, the contrasting of "moderate" Muslims and ISIS's supporters is quite subtle and is not very aggressive. Often, ISIS supporters are, though, more explicit in their attitudes to "moderate" Muslims:

> How do you open a coconut's eyes?
>
> Wait do they even have eyes?
>
> Poor coconuts ;'(66
>
> The one who deliberately takes the kuffar as friends by choice and because he likes them, is one of them.[67]
>
> #JeSuisCharlie!? Have you no shame? Honour? Self respect? How long will you to to [sic] please them? Where are your own morals? You don't have any?[68]
>
> All those Muslims who joined the match in solidarity with Charlie have insulted the prophet alayhi wassalam.[69]

ISIS supporters stress the fact that the ummah is suffering, but no one cares or does anything to save it, especially "moderates". They therefore see ISIS and themselves as the only people who are trying to change the situation, while most of their co-believers neglect their community's interests.

ISIS supporters label Arab regimes "coconuts" as well, since they cooperate with the West, even though, to many people from the West, countries such as Saudi Arabia may look very religious and traditional. However, ISIS and its supporters blame them for being hypocrites and even apostates. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the concept of an "apostate" plays a major role in ISIS-produced propaganda as well as in that of its predecessor, Al Qaeda,[70] and gives the group the right to eliminate its co-believers since they are not "good" enough Muslims.

For example, one tweet depicts the king of Saudi Arabia giving a medal to George W. Bush and saying "You deserve a medal for killing Muslims". In the next picture, Putin scratches his head and says, "I killed Muslims too, my medal?" In the next picture, the Saudi king is shown waving at Putin saying "Come here, don't you worry". In the next picture, the Saudi king is giving a medal to Putin. In the next picture, Barak Obama is shown with eyes full of tears saying "I kill Muslims too, bro". In the last picture, Saudi king is shown giving a medal to Obama saying "And you too habibi".[71]

As demonstrated, the image of a good Muslim is extremely important for ISIS's supporters and, more importantly, they see themselves in this category. They fully share the group's vision of what this notion comprises, and this newly adopted identity makes them feel good. They make sense of themselves as new "true believers" through the refusal of other tastes, partially constructed by ISIS and partially maintained by themselves. Again, similar to subcultural dynamics, people who do not follow the rules and norms of the subculture become bullied and criticised, they are blamed to be "not real" subculture followers. This further strengthens the positive self-perception of "good" group members – they follow the rules and they are true group supporters (in the case of ISIS, true believers, true Muslims) and thus are better and more deserving that those who do not, in their opinion, behave appropriately to their group's norms (i.e. as "true" Muslims). They feel that they are better than other Muslims who either gave up on their ummah (coconuts) or practice a deviant religion (Shiites). They also definitely feel that they are better than *kuffar* – the West. For some young people, who may sometimes feel disadvantaged compared to their British peers, this could be a powerful tool to re-establish their self-esteem. An idea of a good Muslim is also holistic. This means that ISIS followers accept the group's vision of it fully and do not accept any deviation, as it would make them bad Muslims. Graeme Wood, a journalist who interviewed ISIS supporters around the world, discovered the same pattern. One of these ISIS supporters, Musa Cheratonino, stated: "You're a Muslim or you are not. Islam is one hundred percent. You take away one part, and it's no longer Islam".[72] A confirmation of a holistic perception of their religious and human duties was expressed in interviews with two of the most notorious members of ISIS, Alexanda Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh, previously known as part of the brutal ISIS squad dubbed "the Beatles" by the media because of their accents (Mohammed Emwazi, or "Jihadi John", was its most well-known participant). A journalist

who interviewed them asked why they were following the orders of Islamic State if they did not approve its methods and actions (as they claimed). Kotey and Elsheikh answered that, according to Islam, if you recognise someone as the Caliph and Islamic State as the Caliphate, you do not question what the ruler/government does. You accept it as given, as prescribed to you by Islamic law. Elsheikh even gave an example of the UK: if the UK government commits a war crime, you would still remain a citizen and would not denounce it, because it is still your country (quite a questionable argument but, nevertheless, it shows well the reasoning of many ISIS fighters).[73] If this is the way ISIS followers see Islam, it becomes clearer why many of them do not become disgusted by the group's brutality – they accept it as a necessary element of being a "true" Muslim. Indeed, Shamima Begum, a former jihadi bride who left the UK when she was 15, told the reporter: "I was ok with beheadings. From what I've heard, Islamically it is all allowed".[74]

Superman

Most ISIS supporters on social media hold the three above-mentioned identities. Most of the male ISIS recruits tend to depict themselves as warriors, even using pictures of other fighters who died during an attack and whom they would praise for their "feat". It is also common for both men and women to refer to the narrative of strangeness, that is, how they feel alien to the society in which they currently live. Similar to the image of a good Muslim, ISIS supporters do express a lot of positive feelings around these three images.

ISIS's supporters have a very idealised and romanticised vision of themselves as protectors of religion and saviours of all Muslims.[75] It is interesting to see that here Muslims, again, are perceived holistically as one ummah.[76] So, while ISIS supporters exclude a large proportion of Muslims from their worldview, they nevertheless consider ISIS a universal good. ISIS's followers seem to think that some of their co-believers are just not enlightened enough to realise the good coming from the group, which resonates with the concept of *jahiliya* (the state of ignorance) that ISIS often uses to characterise Muslims that do not support them.[77]

The followers of ISIS, however, are "enlightened" and they feel that they are "chosen" by Allah for a noble goal:

> #BeingMuslim means stanfing [sic] with the oppressed #Syria #Palestine #CAR #Burma #Nigeria #Kashmir and more…[78]
>
> Islam is about peace, we eradicate filth in order to bring about peace. If you don't like it, your part of that filth it's very simple tbh.[79]
>
> Allah has made it superior over others, and those of you blond [sic] following other groups against the khilafah, slandering the khilafah.[80]
>
> Even Jihad Qital are blessings from Allah bcoz He choose you to fight for him… and for those stay behind will do their dawah.2.[81]

All tweets that are shown here share the same idea: ISIS's followers are special and extraordinary. The first reason for this is that they are Muslims, so they are blessed to be associated with the best religion in the world. Second, unlike "coconuts", they are aware of the problems, tragedies and sins of contemporary Muslim society and the need for a change. Third, and most important, they are fighting for the sake of saving ummah and pleasing Allah.

For someone who may not be successful and popular in their real life, this feeling of being special can be a powerful driver to admire ISIS. ISIS uses propaganda in a way that makes its recruits feel part of an elite club, to which not everyone is allowed to enter, and those who do are considered to be the best among their peers. The group's followers validate this idea by encouraging and inspiring each other to adopt the right way and to support the group, which was granted a special mission and power by Allah:

> With dawah, we have the obligation to support the mujahideen, to defend their honor from corrupt people who make lies against them.[82]
>
> Think twice. Your stupidity and immaturity won't harm the khilafah. Those who love the khilafah won't stop. If you can't beat them, join them after haqq has been clear and apparent for you. And we've seen that already. The khilafah is not the one joining the jama'a, it is the jama'a that is joining the khilafah. This is by Allah's will only. You don't like it, fine but fear Allah.[83]

Some ISIS supporters tweet about their feelings of distress and discontent with the West, where they were living at the time. They were also tweeting about their strong desire to move from the "Dar-al-Kufr" (the land of disbelief, the West) to the "Dar-al-Islam" (the land of Islam or, in this case, Islamic State): "Why am I here? What is there for me? Why I am not following the steps of the #bravest of all time who die for bigger causes than themselves".[84]

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, a lot of ISIS followers tended to tweet about their lives under the rule of Islamic State. They would tweet about their daily routine, fun activities they do with their fellow jihadists, pizza nights they would have together and other activities. Many rightfully argue that ISIS used these tweets to "normalise" the life under its rule. However, one could also notice that all these tweets were rendering an idea about the happiness and joy of living under ISIS and how excited its supporters are.[85]

They also mock and criticise Muslims who do not support ISIS by posting memes. One of them (I do not show them here due to their graphic nature) has two parts: the first depicts Muslim victims and their plea for help; the second shows that ISIS comes to answer their call, but "moderate" Muslims criticise the group – the meme hinting at the inconsistency of their complaints.[86]

What are you gonna say about #IS when they expel #Shia of #Iraq? When they defeat #Assad? What are your excuses for not supporting #Khilafah?[87]

The self-perception of ISIS supporters after adopting the image of the superman is also expressed through metaphors and pictures (non-verbal

imagery). Two of the most popular terms used by them is "mujahideen" (which women even use to describe their male children) and "lions" as a synonym to it. The pictures they choose often show their affiliation with ISIS or demonstrate their religiousness. Another popular image is that of a lion, a warrior or green birds taking the soul of a martyr to paradise. ISIS followers often use such usernames as "mujahid", "soldier of Allah", "slave of Allah", and "follower of tawhid". So, even if some men do not actively participate in military campaigns, their support for ISIS makes them feel as if they do. Supporting ISIS makes them feel like real men, brave, strong and courageous. Sometimes, they tweet motivational quotes that render their feelings about their place in that war:

> Marshallah, glory be to allah the most high, our brothers that are gone home 2 there resting place with there lord, they r soldiers of allah.[88]
>
> Alhamdulilliah the lions of tawheed are focusing on Kobane 5 km left… No one, not any jet can stop our army #IS #YPG #Kobane.[89]
>
> They don't understand that we are living to die, we are longing for the day we bid farewell to this dunya & finally meet our creator![90]
>
> Aleppo needs the lions of #Islam. #Allah strengthen our Muslim brothers in #Aleppo'. [91]
>
> Real men do not run away from death. They can't be shake [sic] by the enemies because their enemies are nothing but flies! Real mean are those running towards death! Declare his shahada in his time remain and give his one last smile! [92]

Like any brand, ISIS does not offer an abstract image but something very visual that can be incorporated into a personal lifestyle. This is reflected in the group's supporters' accounts. They are concerned with their masculine look and thus discuss the requirements for a "real man's" physical appearance. For example, one can find images and memes advising to wear a long beard as this is the only way how a "real man" must look like.[93]

These pictures show that ISIS supporters are indeed concerned with their self-images. They want to look masculine and brave, and have an image of a noble hero whose whole look expresses his commitment to an important goal.

Similar to an image of a good Muslim, an image of a superman is holistic and has a number of set characteristics. He is pious, he is the protector of Islam and ummah, he is a real man, courageous and glorious, he loves death more than life and he dresses like a soldier and wears a beard, which is considered one of the attributes of faith but also of masculinity. Therefore, if something is missing, that person is not a "real" mujahid-superman. It is also required, of course, to engage in jihad. Some ISIS followers may then decide to engage in real-life violence as a way to fully adopt the image of a mujahid.

This narrative of a "superman" coincides with previous research that has been done on the connection of masculinity and the proneness to extremism.[94] Thus Maleeha Aslam and Michael Kimmel both explored the

role of gender in people's motivations to join extremist/terrorist groups. While Aslam focused on Muslim men in Pakistan, Kimmel looked both at jihadists and extreme right supporters. The findings of both authors are very similar and they also coincide with the present discussion. Both Aslam and Kimmel emphasise the importance of gender stereotypes and male socialisation in extreme groups' recruitment. Thus, they both argue that for many men joining an extremist group was a means to restore their masculinity – to feel powerful, strong, fearless, heroic and that they have a special mission. Moreover, when it comes to jihadists, Aslam emphasises the strong social pressure and very high expectations that a community places on men: they should always succeed, they should be able to provide not only for their wives and satisfy all their wishes, but also for the rest of the family.[95] In this situation, the pressure sometimes becomes too strong and men feel like they are losing their masculinity (especially if their wives work and earn more), and this eventually also may bring them to supporting extremist ideas and eventually joining an organisation.

So, ISIS male supporters in this sense do not differ from any other young and radical men. As I demonstrated above, a lot of tweets posted by "mujahideen" had an idea of "a real man" – how he should look, how he should behave, how he should treat women and his "brothers". For many of them, therefore, ISIS represented a way to achieve a status of a perfect man and fulfil themselves as men. At the same time, the group does not simply let its recruits achieve perfect masculinity. It also gives them a feeling of the supernatural power they acquire (that is why I called this image "superman"). By joining ISIS, the recruits acquire a feeling of invincibility and exceptional might, which excites them even more.

The online space of ISIS supporters looks somewhat like a video game (not surprising, as ISIS was using video games in recruitment). Almost every supporter's self-image is about them being noble warriors with a mission granted them by Allah. This is another example of self-illusion and fantasy immersion, as, of course, this mission exists only in these people's heads and in ISIS's propaganda materials. However, for young men who might struggle to find their true self in real life, the image of a mujahid offered by the group makes them feel empowered and special, better than people around them. Moreover, as mentioned earlier with regard to the image of a true believer, the atmosphere of secrecy and privacy (private chats, codes used to avoid social media suspension, common symbols discussed in the previous chapter, close attention from the police) adds excitement to this affair. They feel like they are on a special mission. Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger briefly addressed this feeling in their book *ISIS: The State of Terror*. They describe the online conversations of ISIS foreign fighters where topics often turn to fun and adventure, rather than serious religious or political matters. They cite one of the fighters who coined the term "five-star jihad"[96] to describe their experience of fighting in Syria. Stern and Berger use this term to show that while political and religious motives do play a major role, a large number of young

people went to Syria uniquely for the sake of this extraordinary experience. Stern and Berger present this trend as simple adventure-seeking. As this book shows, this adventure-seeking is based on a desire to be part of something "cool" and exclusive, which is not easily available for everyone. However, it is not just that; otherwise, most ISIS supporters could have probably satisfied this desire by other means. It is also about how this adventure is contributing to the construction of their identities and improving (as they would think) their self-images.

Superwoman

Another very vivid demonstration of how the images promoted by ISIS are adopted and how supporters become transported into an imaginary world comes from female ISIS supporters. Often, they are even more active than men. As with other images discussed earlier, female ISIS supporters seem to fully adopt and enjoy the role that the group offers them. Also similar to other images, there is a very strong feeling of the superiority of Muslim women over Western women. They emphasise their difference from the *kuffar* – they see themselves as more religious, moral and pure than Western women.

One of the most popular discussions between female followers of ISIS is about wearing a niqab (a full-body cover). ISIS's female supporters not only actively encourage their "sisters" to wear it, but to also make it part of their newly adopted identity of a "good Muslim woman" or, as I labelled it, a "superwoman". Moreover, if they see accounts of Muslim women who do not look modest enough, they would publicly shame them. They also argue that, in contrast to a popular Western belief that they are forced to wear it, it is their choice and takes them closer to Allah. Most importantly, they see it as an object of their pride and honour, distinguishing them from sinful Western women who walk in the streets "naked". Again, one can see a holistic perception of "Western women" as too light-minded and immodest, while, in reality, only a very small percentage of them might be reasonably described in that way. ISIS's female supporters often retweet the same rhetorical question (in various formulations): Why is being "naked" a "choice", but being covered is an "oppression"? One can see their clear annoyance at the stereotypical perception of them combined with a discriminatory attitude that they may encounter in UK society. For example, one tweet says:

> Alhamdulillah, love being a Muslimah! I was walking to the station, when I noticed a bunch of young Muslims smoking, whistling and gawping at a woman who wore a skirt and a low cut top. As I was walking towards them, they all moved to either sides of the street, leaving me a pathway to walk through, they hid their cigarettes behind them, and looked down and let me walk past. The respect I got from them, for being a covered Muslimah…Subhan'Allah. [97]

In this tweet, one can see an interesting example of self-illusion – while the reaction of the boys may be the demonstration of their biased attitudes towards women in a niqab ("they are potential terrorists with bombs under their cover"), the author of this tweet interpreted it as a proof of their respect.

> A Muslim woman should feel uncomfortable with the idea of strange men staring at her, whether in person or in pictures…[98]
>
> What about women who walk semi naked in the streets, why they have the right to do so while Muslim women have no right to cover #burkini KMT[99]
>
> If a woman is free to show her body, why should she not be free to cover it? [100]
>
> You may not be a fairytale princess but you will always be a princess of Islam.[101]

ISIS's female followers also emphasise that their religion is made to protect them and that their husbands love and respect them. This is pronounced as opposite to some Western ideas about the oppressive nature of Islam and Muslim men. ISIS's female supporters tell everyone proudly that they do not need to be "liberated":

> Islam is the first and only religion which put forth set of rules to honor and protect women.[102]
>
> Nobody's gonna remove their niqāb cos some kuffār say so. THAT is OPPRESSION: Ppl tryng control & restrict what I wear. #BanNudityNotModesty[103]

ISIS female supporters' profile images are similar to the ones used by men. They depict religious symbols or inspirational quotes, or show "atrocities" against Muslims. Specifically, "female" images would be concerned with the idea of not displaying themselves; they would either have pictures in a niqab or some stock pictures of flowers and animals (often cats and lionesses). Even the choice of a profile image, therefore, adds to their self-perception as a good Muslim and a good woman who is modest and fully covers herself. She is strong, brave and ready to protect her religion and fight for Allah – like men.

One can also see a strong negative reaction among female ISIS supporters to a commonly accepted neo-Orientalist idea of a Muslim woman as passive and oppressed, which is widely spread in the West.[104] They proclaim themselves to be fully potent agents, willing and capable of protecting their religion alongside men. This is also demonstrated by their Twitter handles – "warrior of Islam" (which one would normally attribute to a man), "mujahidah", "shahidah", and "slave of Allah". They also emphasise the difference in their feminism compared to Western/liberal feminism. While a recent trend in the West has been the devolution of gender differences and gender neutrality as a way to achieve equality, ISIS supporters are demonstratively feminine.

Their accounts are full of cute pictures with animals, flowers, discussions about clothing, marriages and children. They therefore emphasise differences between men and women and their roles in society. However, they portray these differences as natural, and claim that men and women should not attempt to adopt the roles of the other gender.

However, if one thinks that this exaggerated femininity also means that these women are just passive followers, attracted by an idea of a happy marriage, who are "seduced" by men (as some journalists argue)[105] they would be mistaken. An image of an "ISIS woman" gives the group's female followers a very strong feeling of self-pride and superiority. They feel that they are much better than non-Muslim women and also better than Muslim women who do not support ISIS. Their new identities are being formed on the basis of being different from other women, specifically Western women. The reason for this seems to be some Muslim women, in their ordinary lives, might feel inferior to these women – less successful and less respected, which was shown in the work by Azadeh Moaveni, who explored the stories of ISIS's female supporters from around the world.[106]

The feeling of superiority they have is caused not only by the fact that they are particularly cautious of guarding their "purity" but also because they feel empowered.[107] The main message one can see in all conversations is that they are strong and brave, they have agency and ability to participate in the future of their community. They matter. They may play a different role in the Caliphate, but this role is no less important than the role of men.

This coincides with the findings of Caron Gentry and Laura Sjoberg. These researchers argued that examining women's violence in the context of their femininity is a wrong approach. They particularly point at an influential book by Mia Bloom, who, despite the impressive research that has been done, tended to frame the findings around the reasons that are specific to women as women (for example: rape; search for respect, as they have a subordinate position in a society).[108] Gentry and Sjoberg argue that this approach is counter-productive. They maintain that female violence is no different from *human* violence. The problem in understanding female violence, the authors claim, is that it tends to be presented as exceptional, not typical, going against their nature.[109] As the examination of female ISIS supporters demonstrates, these women's behaviour is indeed no different from that of men: they become fascinated with the images offered by ISIS and captured by the fantasy world that ISIS created for them. While, of course, ISIS does use grooming tactics, and some young women are indeed attracted by a prospect of marriage, the conversations on pro-ISIS supporters' social media shows that even the idea of marriage is linked to the idea of being a potent agent. ISIS allows these young women to believe in it.

These observations show the differences between the gender aspects of ISIS recruitment. If men are mostly driven by an attempt to fulfil expectations related to gender stereotypes (to be real men) enhanced by an idea of acquiring superhuman power, women do quite the opposite. In many ways, female

supporters of ISIS resist gender stereotypes and join the group because it lets them play a more active role in society. At the same time, as I showed in the previous chapter, ISIS does exploit a traditional (i.e. stereotypical) image of a Muslim woman as being modest and quiet, letting the man take leadership positions and serving as his supporter. ISIS promotes an idea of being a "real woman" – soft, feminine, beautiful. The reason for this seems to be, on the one hand, the necessity for the group to follow its ideology, which gives a woman a secondary role. On the other hand, there is the necessity to find something that would attract those girls, who might not appreciate an idea of various restrictions that will be imposed on them. The group, therefore, has developed a very special, blended approach to female recruits. It "sells" an idea that in the caliphate a woman plays a major role by performing her traditional duties as well as other societal duties should she want it. Therefore, a woman can be active and powerful without giving up her femininity and softness. As the above discussion showed, ISIS female supporters do accept and like the feeling of being a somewhat cartoonish type of a heroine that combines typical female features and at the same time possesses superpower. The narrative of superpower is, therefore, something that unites the peculiarities of recruitment and men and women – both do seem to enjoy an idea that they are special and have skills and traits that make them different from "ordinary" people.

The review of ISIS supporters' social media accounts provides some evidence that the propaganda created and disseminated by the group indeed worked in a manner similar to advertising and had a described effect on the group's target audience. ISIS supporters adopted four images the group offered them: a good Muslim, a superman, a martyr, a stranger and a superwoman. They also seem to be living in the imaginary world created by ISIS for them. In their online conversations, they present themselves as "heroes", "lions", "princesses", and "real men" – a somewhat fairy-tale-like, idealised characters, who only have positive characteristics. They in a way recreate the stories told by ISIS – "true believers" or "good Muslims" are struggling to stay in the land of sinful Westerners and dream to become reunited with the Caliphate, heroic mujahideen dream about big battles and are ready to protect the ummah, yet they are invincible and super-strong, beautiful women are feminine and strong, building the new life with their brave husbands, supporting them but also taking part in the campaign.

One can notice that "hooks" that I was talking about in the previous chapters are evidently present in its supporters' rhetoric. The discussions they have and the terms they use indeed show that they see themselves (or want to be seen) as a community of "chosen" and "special" people. These people are different from the rest because they are morally superior and "enlightened", and they have been granted special powers to see the problems that exist in the world but most importantly to cope with them and beat the enemies of Muslims. It applies to both men and women, but women also tend to express what I called "strength in femininity" – they emphasise their female side and

beauty, yet they show that they are not just silent attribute to men but fully potent agents who are equally important for the Caliphate.

One can also notice that these images indeed help supporters form a strong connection with ISIS – in the examples given in the chapter, it's been shown how ISIS supporters praise the group and present it as the only solution to all the problems that exist in the world. While this is not surprising as expectedly terrorist groups do often build their propaganda around the narrative of "crisis" and "solution", it is interesting to see how pro-ISIS accounts adopt the same language and the same vision for themselves as the group offers them. The above-mentioned terms of "lions" and "princesses of Islam" do come from the rhetoric of ISIS and became engrained into supporters' vocabulary defining who they are (or more precisely who they want to be). Indeed, they see the group as a way to construct and reconstruct their identities, become unique, different and special, compared to others, which gives them a great amount of excitement.

Notes

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5 Getting Lost in the Fantasy

"Jihadi Culture", Excitement, and Bonding

Another indication of the adoption of the images promoted by ISIS by its target audience and the existence of an imaginary world is the existence of a special community of the group's supporters. This community gives people an opportunity to live in an alternative reality where their new identities can be not only fully expressed but supported and further reinforced. I have already mentioned in the previous chapter how the manner of communication and behaviour of ISIS supporters online indeed resembles a subculture.

In fact, the existence of jihadist communities and a specific subculture is nothing new. Scholars Gilbert Ramsay and Thomas Hegghammer and his colleagues showed that jihadists do the same. They argue that such "normal" activities like singing, writing and spreading *anasheed*, sharing specific pictures and videos and discussing dreams constitute a bond between jihadists both online and offline, and make their commitment to the group's cause stronger.[1] These authors did a fantastic job in describing the jihadi communities and their subculture and argued that indeed it enforces an emotional connection between recruits and the group. However, they look at the subculture mostly as a way to create a stronger bond between the members of the community, focusing slightly less on what effect it has on its identities and most importantly on their connection with the group. This is what I will attempt to highlight.

So, how can a subculture help brand achieve its goals? In Chapter 1, I briefly touched upon it, saying that the emergence of a subculture first of all serves as an indication that brand's advertising has a desire effect (an obvious conclusion) and that the subculture further strengthens it (less obvious conclusion). According to research, brand community or brand subculture can be understood as "people that possess a common interest in a specific brand and create a parallel social universe (subculture) rife with its own myths, values, rituals, vocabulary and hierarchy", which can equally be applied to the online space.[2] Further, Muniz and O'Guinn name several elements that constitute a brand community or a brand subculture:

"(1) consciousness of a kind, i.e. a sense of belonging to an in-group, thanks to a brand that is patronized by all of the group members.
(2) evidence of the rituals and traditions that surround the brand.

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(3) a sense of obligation to the community and its members which is often, but not always, shared by group members (concerning, for example, product repairs or services that are more personal in nature)".[3]

In this chapter I will, therefore, examine several elements that constitute the jihadi online subculture, such as topic they discuss, the language they use (specific terms that they use for communication and recognition of each other), jokes and symbolic visual material they share and something that has been called "jihadi cool" by other researchers.[4]

Topics

The first aspect I examine are the topics that ISIS supporters discuss and the ways in which these topics strengthen their newly acquired identities. People who belong to the same subculture often tend to have common topics, shared meaning and similar opinions and feelings about them.[5] When one looks at ISIS supporters' online community, it becomes very evident that they do indeed share the same information space and talk about the same things. While ISIS uses a lot of different narratives, most conversations and shared content of the group's followers are centred on several themes.

The first and most important theme is the sufferings of Muslims. The popularity of this discussion is easy to explain through the works of other scholars such as Louise Richardson. The researcher argues that revenge is one of the most powerful motivations for terrorists.[6] Therefore, the constant exchange of disturbing examples of atrocities committed against Muslims is primarily aimed at mobilisation. At the same time, sharing the same feeling of anger and pain about the sufferings of the members of the community makes the bond between ISIS's supporters stronger, because (as will be demonstrated in the next chapter) they feel that they are the people who have to do something about it.

The discussion splits into several further discussions. The first one is the "extinction" and torture of the Muslim people around the world. This topic occupies most of ISIS's supporters' "air time". While some further topics may vary from account to account, this one persists in each and every one of them. The posts are emotionally disturbing; they have a very evident goal to provoke anger and frustration among the readers. Most of them are accompanied by very graphic pictures depicting dead or injured people and text describing what happened to them. In most cases, the posts are talking about Syria, but also Yemen, Myanmar (the Rohingya Muslims), India, Russia (Chechnya), China (the Uyghurs), Bosnia, and Israel.

The second narrative here is related to the first one and is mostly about the causes of the sufferings of Muslims. Normally, a post with a disturbingly graphic image is accompanied by a comment stating that these are the consequences of the actions of the West – *kuffar* (and the Assad regime in the case of Syria). Another possible development in this topic can be the double

standards that exist in the West in regard to Muslims. In many cases, there will be an example of a real crime committed by a European/American (e.g. a far-right terrorist), which is labelled as a "crime" or a result of a mental breakdown contrasted with a crime committed by a Muslim person and labelled as "terrorism". This rhetoric enhances the "us against them" narrative so actively being promoted by ISIS.

The second big topic is connected with the first one and is the idea of the unity of Muslims. Muslims are one ummah – their religion unites them and makes them one people, regardless of where they are based. The owners of the reviewed accounts address each other as "brothers" and "sisters", emphasising their close connection.

Another topic is the successes of ISIS and the glorification of the group and mujahideen. ISIS is portrayed as a protector of all Muslims, the only force that can stop terrible assaults against them and unite them together under one flag and one true religion. Accounts created during the peak of ISIS's activity (2014–2015) tend to exchange pictures and stories of "martyrs" – fighters who died in action. Accounts that were created later (2016–2017) do not do this so much, the account owners probably trying to protect themselves from suspension. This may also explain the lack of posts about a happy life under ISIS rule in this period.

These three topics clearly resonate with images of a superman and martyr as well as a stranger promoted by ISIS. The community confirms that dying for the cause of Allah and for the cause of the community is not only noble but also absolutely necessary, and therefore, being a mujahid and/or martyr is something a good man should be striving for. The rhetoric about the hostile West has a clear connection with an idea of "strangeness", but in an even more extreme way. Not only is the West alien to Muslims, it is also hostile.

The next topic that ISIS supporters share is religion, which aims to support the image of a "true Muslim" promoted by the group. It varies from simple prayer texts, praises to Allah, advice on how to be a good Muslim and a good person in general, calls to pray as much as possible and quotes from the Qur'an and other religious texts. The main idea, which all users project, is that the whole point of a person's existence is to serve Allah, and that all their actions should be aimed at pleasing Allah and glorifying Him. It is quite typical for the members of this community to emphasise their "Muslimness" by adopting telling names, for example, @SlaveOfAllah, @PrincessOfIslam, and also using a lot of religion-related expressions in their conversations, for example, Bismillah (in the name of God) at the beginning of their discussion threads. In addition, expectedly, all users express support for Sharia, providing such arguments that it is the fairest and the most perfect law, as it comes from Allah. A very significant aspect of the religious discussion is the "oneness of Allah". ISIS supporters say that unlike followers of other religions, they do not worship "idols" or many gods (e.g. the Trinity in Christianity). Allah is the only divine force that should be worshipped, He is perfect and all-mighty. This idea is so important that ISIS followers are ready to defend it with arms

in their hands, and among all titles of mujahideen, there is actually "protectors of Tawhid" (oneness of Allah).

A lot of people post about their negative feelings about living in "Dar-al-Kufr" (the land of disbelief), mainly complaining about how "tired" they are to be there and how much they want to come back to the land of true religion ("Dar-al-Islam"). Another very popular topic here is the contrast between earthly life and the afterlife. ISIS followers talk a lot about how insignificant, short and even pathetic human life is, and how beautiful it will become once turned into the afterlife. They all repeat that they came to this world only temporarily and cannot wait to return to Allah. While a lot of tweets of that sort are no longer available, one can still find references to the migration to IS and the life there contrasted to life in the West. All this rhetoric has a strong thematic connection with the image of a stranger (it is hard to live in the West). This is the same message that *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* are sending to its readers: that they will be happy under the rule of IS is repeated and reinforced online by the community.

Sometimes, even though quite rare, one can find confessions from the users about their families who do not support their liking of the group. They complain about how lonely they feel and how they may need to break away from their relatives for the greater good. Their relatives are lost, and they are not good Muslims. Thus, ISIS supporters have to distance themselves from them as their love for Allah is greater than their love for their family. In a certain way, this message resonates with the one spread for good children and good women: you may not obey your parents/your husband if they are not true believers.

Many researchers pinpointed the crucial role that female recruits play in the group's activities, both online and in real life.[7] Indeed, female supporters of ISIS form another interesting community and their conversations do repeat a lot of messages sent by ISIS to "superwomen".

On the one hand, they share the same interests and topics as men – especially, around religion and the situation with Muslims around the world.[8] On the other hand, they place a great emphasis on specifically female issues – namely, wearing the niqab (a full-body veil where eyes are not covered). They talk a lot about the niqab being their choice and how wonderful they feel wearing it. They also emphasise that it is part of being a good Muslim, so it is obligatory for every woman if she wants to please Allah. Another topic is related to family, children and marriages; a repetitive narrative is the desire of a Muslim woman to find a husband with "*gheera*" (protective jealousy). They say to each other that, in this case, they need to accept the fact that their husbands would want them to cover themselves and not wear make-up, as a means to protect them from other men's eyes. In addition to this, women tend to post content about what relationships within a family should look like, with the main idea of mutual love, respect, and support between husbands and wives.

They also, of course, talk about their children, posting some funny or moving videos or pictures of them. Generally, female supporters tend to post

lighter content, which is more fun – videos of animals, some fashion advice and inspirational quotes from the Qur'an. They also talk about dreams, which, according to researchers from Durham University Iain R. Edgar and Gwynned de Looijer, is an important part of jihadists' social practices, with dreams often used to inspire fighters for actions.[9] Indeed, the ladies supporting ISIS do not have all those ordinary dreams of flying or falling in love or failing during an exam. In their dreams, they talk to renowned Islamist scholars or see religion-related manifestations. And, of course, their followers always interpret those dreams as a sign of a woman's particular piety, or a prophecy that they will greatly contribute to the Muslim community's future.

They also, however, engage in political discussions, not only doing so by praising mujahideen but actively commenting on UK politics (a general narrative being that it is terrible and they want to leave this country), explaining why democracy is not a good political system and how the Caliphate is a perfect place for every Muslim.

What looking at these topics can tell us? First, it becomes clear that the community of ISIS supporters share the same topics of interest and have similar opinions and sentiments on them. Most of these topics derive from ISIS's propaganda and, in one way or another, pertain to the images that the group spreads. Discussing these topics, therefore, makes the supporters more and more convinced that their newly adopted vision of the world, acquired with their new identities, is widely shared and supported.

What is more interesting is that the type of topics, discussed by this community members shows how their subculture developed according to a certain technique used by brands to further connect with its followers. It is called "brand as underdog" and refers to the way how a brand presents and positions itself for its fans.[10] The idea behind this approach is that when a smaller brand faces big and powerful ones, it understands that it does not have enough sources to compete with them and thus uses their strength to attract supporters. If we look again at the discussions that ISIS supporters had online, they are at most developing over the idea that the West is at war against Muslims and Muslims are generally under the attack. Military strength and economic welfare of the West are presented not as its benefits but as means of attacking Muslims. Moreover, there is a clear narrative of counter-establishment and counter-status quo in the discussion of ISIS followers. This further speaks to the subcultural characteristics of this community. Subcultures tend to have " 'outsider status', a significant degree of marginality and an outlaw culture… The meanings that subcultures create stand in opposition or indifference to the accepted meanings of the majority".[11] ISIS, as demonstrated later, builds its entire propaganda on the narrative of differences between the group and its supporters and the rest of the world, which makes their new identities and affiliation with the group even stronger. ISIS presents itself as a small but powerful group of righteous Muslims who are fighting to protect their co-believers. A similar idea was expressed by Jan Christoffer Andersson and Sveinung Sandberg, who suggested that some ISIS followers support the

group to show their "otherness" and detach themselves from the mainstream society.[12]

This idea of "being different" is also displayed in other practices, such as the use of specific terminology, jokes, similar pictures and similar Twitter handles. On the one hand, the same style further strengthens the link between the members of the subculture and the brand. At the same time, as mentioned earlier, an element of exclusivity plays an important role in a brand's "coolness". Specifically, people would like to feel that the group they belong to is something special, unique and exclusive. The use of special language and other cultural attributes contribute to this feeling.

Terminology

People within the same subculture should be able to understand terms that their community is using and be able to use them too. Indeed, supporters of ISIS do have a shared vocabulary. If one also looks at ISIS-created propaganda, one can see that the group was using words related to Islam extensively. The branding lenses would argue that this is again to create a feeling that its supporters belong to the same secret club, which has its own secret language.

On the one hand, this vocabulary does not differ from the language any religious Muslim would use. It is essentially a number of terms related to religion. On the other hand, a comparison between ISIS supporters' accounts and 80 other accounts of Muslims and accounts related to Islam shows that there is a difference. ISIS followers tend to refer to certain terms much more often than people who do not share ISIS's views. Moreover, when I tried to use these words as hashtags while searching for relevant accounts, 95 per cent of the searches lead to ISIS supporters.

While the vocabulary ISIS supporters use is very big, here, I reviewed some of the most actively used terms (terms that she encountered in each of the accounts she examined):

> Tawhid – it has been already mentioned that this term means "the oneness of Allah". This is indeed a very sensitive and important topic for ISIS supporters. The term is most often used to oppose Christians and Jews, "mushrikin" (polytheists) who worship "idols", therefore, committing the act of "shirk" (another word from jihadists' active vocabulary), which is one of the most serious sins in Islam. To emphasise their righteousness, ISIS supporters often use the adjective "muwahid" (fem. muwahida) meaning "monotheist" in their threads and even in accounts' names.

Another word, of course, is "jihad". This term means the holy war, in both military (against disbelievers) and spiritual (against yourself, which moderate versions of Islam promote) senses. At the moment, most accounts using jihad

in its violent connotation would display signs of support for radical versions of Islam. ISIS followers (like any other Islamist militant group's supporters) call jihad the "peak of Islam", meaning that in their opinion, this is the noblest way to demonstrate their love for Allah.

There are several terms related to that, and they are very well known: "martyr" and "mujahid" (the warrior of Allah). All ISIS's fighters are called so (depending on whether they are dead or still alive) and are praised and glorified on social media almost like stars. The users often post stories about heroic actions of "mujahideen" in their fight against the enemy and the even more heroic deaths of "martyrs" who sacrificed their lives for (as it is claimed) their fellow Muslims.

The enemy that mujahideen are fighting against are known as "*kuffar*" (disbelievers). This term is another quite precise marker, which can indicate that the owner of an account may be a potential ISIS follower. Most often, this term is used in relation to Western people, strengthening once more the narrative of a contrast between the "pious" and the "sinners".

Another major enemy is Shi'a Muslims or "Rafidah". As mentioned before, ISIS supporters dedicate a lot of their attention to Shiites and blame them for their "dirty religion", which is not even recognised as a version of Islam. It is important to mention, however, that while ISIS claims the Sunni–Shi'a rivalry natural and asserts the necessity to eliminate the adherents of the deviant religion, it has nothing to do with the real tenets of Islam and Islamic scholars. Even the creator of fundamentalism, Said Qutb, did not call for the elimination of Shiites. Instead, he stated that while Shi'a may be misguided Muslims, nevertheless, "Islam does not force people to accept its beliefs, rather it aims to provide an environment where people enjoy full freedom of belief".[13]

The next two terms are "*dunya*" and "*akhiran*", where you find "*Jannah*" – earthly life, the afterlife and Paradise. ISIS supporters are not using these terms uniquely; religious Muslims or accounts dedicated to Islam would use them too. There is, however, a slight difference. ISIS supporters display a much more significant "affection" towards these terms. They use them very often (normally, a reference to Paradise can be found at least once a week). Another moment is their focus on the afterlife. They say that they are not interested in earthly life and that it does not deserve much attention from "true believers". All their thoughts are about how to become reunited with Allah. Some of them would even post about their tiredness of "being in *dunya*", and their dreams to leave for *Jannah* as soon as possible.

"Ummah" (the community of Muslims) is another word used by jihadists and sympathisers. Again, as in a previous example, it does not have any aggressive or military connotation and could be used by anyone. However, as in the previous example, ISIS supporters seem to make use of it. They use this word a lot, emphasising that Muslims should unite and deserve a place where they can all live a better life together.

Female ISIS supporters did not display any differences in the usage of the words. In addition, they often use the word "niqab" (full veil), which they

often incorporate into their account names (@niqabi), but this is due to the fact that the question of the niqab, as mentioned earlier, is one of the most widely discussed among women supporting ISIS.

There are some other terms that are being used by this population, for example, "*dua*" (payer), "*haqq*" (truth), "*shaytan*" (devil), "*fitna*" (falling for a sin) and others. They are, however, encountered more rarely than the ones discussed above, and are not used by every person in the sample.

A community of ISIS supporters also tends to have usernames that distinguish them from other users. Men tend to use such combinations as Abu (brother) + name or Abu + Mujahid/Jihad, Warrior of Tawhid or names of radical imams or the names of ISIS leaders (Anwar al Awlaki, Sheikh Ahmed Jibril, Abu Bakr al Baghdadi). Sometimes, one can find account names such as "Green Bird", referring to the green birds that deliver the soul of a martyr to Allah.

Women would use Umm (mother) + name, Ukt (sister) + name, or names reflecting their desire to wear the niqab. Both men and women may use names demonstrating their attitude to religion (e.g. Slave of Allah or Proud Muslim). In sum, users change their profile names to something related to ISIS to further demonstrate their new identity, similar to a football fan wearing a T-shirt with their favourite team's emblem.

ISIS supporters also use a number of recognisable hashtags. Some of them are quite obvious and refer to Islamic State, like #IS, #Dawla, #DawlaIslamiya (Islamic State in Arabic), #Khilafah, #AlHayat. However, this was more typical for accounts that were opened in 2014–2015, when none of the social media giants had yet started hunting them down. At the moment, these kinds of hashtags are very rare, as they make a user visible. There were a number of social media campaigns detected – all conducted in different periods. Most of them, however, did not have any explicit radical message but aimed to raise awareness about the atrocities (or perceived atrocities) against Muslims around the world: #FreeMuslimPrisoners (each accompanied by a personal story of a Muslim held in custody in the United States, Iran, Israel, and Europe), #PrayForSyria (similar hashtags were used by Western Twitter users after attacks committed by ISIS), #JeSuisMuslim (as an analogue to #JeSuisCharlie, which emerged after the attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* magazine team in January 2015).

Language is often considered a unifying element for communities. If people speak the same language, they are able to understand each other better and they feel more connected. The same is true for subcultures – sharing the same slang makes members feel more connected with each other and at the same time with the brand or an idea around which the subculture developed. One can see from the brief analysis above that the use of specific terms, nicknames and hashtags made it easier for ISIS supporters to connect and recognise each other and further strengthen their perception of being united and at the same time different from the rest of the world.

Pictures

A lot of ISIS supporters (and generally supporters of jihadi groups) tend to use quite a lot of visual materials. Along with purely propagandist content, such as videos or advertisements for new issues of ISIS magazines or spreading the news about the group, there is also a function pertaining to the formation of advertising literacy. Just as fans of Apple would recognise the company's logo or the shape of an Apple device, similarly, ISIS supporters seem to use pictures to say something about themselves (which will be discussed in the next chapter) and also to recognise like-minded individuals.

There are several recognisable categories of pictures. The first one is the easiest and, at the same time, the rarest due to the social media platforms' increased concerns over extremist content. These are the pictures that have explicit ISIS-related symbols – flags, emblems, photos of al-Baghdadi or their own photos as mujahideen. They can be used either by themselves (e.g. a lot of people use an ISIS flag instead of their profile pictures or Twitter headers), or be photoshopped to some other pictures.

ISIS supporters tend to use a lot of pictures related to religion. These may be just cards with quotes from the Qur'an or photos of Mecca (holy city of Muslims) or pictures of the Qur'an or a praying person. These ones do not really help in distinguishing ISIS supporters, as they can be used by any religious person. ISIS followers, however, tend to use a picture with a "symbol of belief" (*shahada*), a pointing finger, much more often than anyone else. So far, all accounts that have this kind of a picture are confirmed to be pro-ISIS.

Expectedly, jihadists use a lot of pictures with a "noble warrior" theme, whether real – actual people shown in full military outfit – or fictional. In this case, these warriors look very much like Medieval Arab fighters, possibly referring to the times of the nation's glory and success.

Jihadists like using images of animals, particularly those that are considered noble or brave. Lions (and, surprisingly, cats) are clear champions; they can be widely encountered, especially among profile pictures. Some other animals that can be encountered from time to time are black horses and eagles, but these are rarer.

ISIS supporters tend to share and use as profile pictures images that show how beautiful life in Paradise will be. They normally depict wonderful landscapes with a lot of plants, and often waterfalls and quotes reminding us that human life is just a short moment.

It is harder to pinpoint any trends in female ISIS supporters' choice of images. Some of them do not differ from those representing the men – they would share pictures with ISIS-related themes or religion-related pictures (including ones depicting Paradise). The choice of profile pictures for women is conditioned by stricter rules; as adherents of a Salafist Islam, they are not allowed to show their faces. So, they would either not use any pictures at all, or use something neutral (like flowers or animals – typically, lionesses or cats,

thus repeating the pattern with male ISIS followers) or, in most cases, their own pictures in niqab.

Sometimes, the women would use more aggressive images depicting their role in jihad. For example, one profile picture depicts a woman in niqab holding a Kalashnikov. Another picture shows a grenade coloured in pink.

These are the most popular pictures and visual motives that can be seen on ISIS supporters' social media accounts. The next chapter will discuss how these aspects help them to construct their identity and to project an idealised image of themselves.

Jokes

While jihad and martyrdom are serious matters, ISIS's online supporters still find time to make jokes or be ironic. Humour is also known for its ability to unite people – if you and another person find the things funny, and if you laugh at the same things, you would feel a connection between each other.[14] Most jokes that ISIS supporters share are, as one might expect, about the United States (#scamerica as some users call it) and other Western countries (and Israel). Normally, these jokes fall within one of four categories: blaming the West for "fulfilling the orders of Saudi Arabia and Iran"; highlighting the West's disastrous policy in the Middle East (sarcastic jokes); double standards applied by the West; and contrasting the losers (the West) with the heroes (Muslims or ISIS). For example, in one picture there are four American men depicted speaking on the media. One says, "Torture is wrong except for when America endorses it". The second says, "Transparency is important except for when it hurts America's reputation". The third says, "Human rights must be respected except if that conflicts with America's interests". The fourth says, "International laws must be obeyed. Except for when America wants to break them". Under all four pictures the caption says "American exceptionalism".[15] Another tweet shows a dialogue between a Western person and an ISIS member. The ISIS member asks if the Westerner wants to see a scary movie, to what the Westerner responds "Pease, I haven't been afraid after watching any film in my life". The ISIS member then depicted showing one of its famous propaganda videos – Clashing of Swords – and we see the Westerner terrified.[16]

Another type of joke is about religion or, to be more precise, a contrast between the beauty and logic of Islam and the nonsense of all other religions. For example, one of the users wrote this: "Christianity: Belief that God impregnated His own mother in order to give birth to Himself only to die on a cross … makes perfect sense".[17]

Women also share some jokes and memes. As mentioned before, some of the content they post is perfectly "normal", including funny animal videos or cute moments involving their kids. The jihad-related aspect is quite interesting. They would, of course, advocate obedience and the traditional female roles of wives and mothers. However, the jokes they share show their

desire and vision to play a significant role in the movement. They reject any idea of being "a grey woman" or "a woman interested in girly stuff", and think that jihad is actually something that emancipates them and allows them to live a more active life. For example, one joke depicts a woman in niqab holding Kalashnikovs with a caption: "They wanted me to become a nurse, I became a mujahida instead"[18] In another picture, two girls – one is a typical Westerner with blonde hair and make-up and a Muslim girl in niqab – are shown. The thought bubble under the head of the blonde girl shows that her only thoughts are about make-up, drinks and men. The thoughts under the head of the Muslim girl shows that she thinks about Paradise – emphasising her spirituality and purity in contrast with Western girls.[19]

As can be seen, jokes play an important role in bonding and cementing the relationship between ISIS supporters. They make them feel as one unified group while distinguishing themselves from others.

Elements of "Cool" in the Pro-ISIS Community

As mentioned, one of the important characteristics of a subculture is an element of "cool" associated with the experience offered by a brand.

The noble images of heroic warriors, beautiful women and good Muslims are complemented by a more fun content, which is aimed at showing the members that the most exciting things will start when they fully associate themselves with the subculture by action. So, ISIS was using various elements of pop culture to make jihad look like an adventure of a lifetime, which its followers are going to love.

Thus, the picture of a young ISIS fighter posing with a Nutella jar, which was made a real icon of the "human face" of ISIS by the media, even if the actual idea seems quite basic. ISIS fighters who had already travelled to Syria, like a jihadist dubbed "Hungry Hamza"[20] for his tweets about food, would express their love for Western fast food or Krispy Donuts, or pose with a can of Red Bull.[21]

Generally, ISIS supporters used to have everything a young Internet user could wish for. For example, Abdel Bari Atwan describes how ISIS supporters would have various gaming apps or special groups where young women would discuss what to bring and what to wear when they reach the Caliphate.[22] The group even developed several full-fledged online video games in the style of *Call of Duty*, titled with a certain humour *Call of Jihad*, which would transfer the player into a virtual world of ISIS, where they can enjoy being heroes without leaving their seats.[23] Some of them, consequently, decided that they wanted a more authentic experience.

The magazines *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* have pages with advertising of apps that are designed to help the group's recruits to learn Arabic if they do not know it. There was even a version for children with a colourful and cheerful design that one would hardly expect from a group famous for its gruesome execution videos.

Moreover, the group started its own merchandise project. ISIS was not only making and selling flags but also "branded" clothing such as T-shirts, hoodies and caps.[24]

The group was also actively using celebrities, such as German rapper Deza Dogg, who was subsequently killed in Syria. Before that, he was a powerful advocate for ISIS, whose fame and the celebrity charm did work as an attraction for young people.[25]

The group would also be unashamed to use Western pop culture to attract more young people. Thus, as analyst Ryan Mauro notes:

> Another ISIS supporter's photo has a Batman-like image with an Islamic State flag on his costume. He recently tweeted that the Islamic State could defeat the Justice League, a team of comic-book superheroes including Batman and Superman.[26]

One of the most famous examples of "jihadi cool" became the Twitter account called @ISILCats, created by the group in 2014. The account was managed on behalf of cats and kittens that were living on the territories held by ISIS. The owner of the account would mimic cats' language and explain how happy cats are in these territories, and how much they love their "mewjahideen".[27]

All these methods created a new phenomenon called "jihadi chic" or, as mentioned earlier, "jihadi cool".[28] The group not only managed to create a softer and more appealing image of itself, but, even more importantly, it further strengthened its followers' perception of belonging to a closed and trendy club, which gives its members the status of being special.[29] This further strengthened the bond within the community, the bond between the community and ISIS (as a brand), and also individual members' excitement over their appropriated identities.

What is also interesting is that researchers tend to single out the phenomenon of "jihadi cool" or jihadist subculture in general. However, with the increased visibility of Muslims in consumption – both in terms of being more open and vocal about their special cultural and religious needs and being more proactive in establishing places which could satisfy those needs (e.g. halal shops, restaurants), more and more researchers speak about the idea of "Muslim cool", which represents a fusion of pop culture and traditional Islamic values in all areas of life and entertainment.[30] For many young Muslims, this has become a way to combine "Muslimness" and fun.

With the rise of a younger Muslim population and the increased visibility of the community, there is currently a significant quantity of TV shows, music and even Muslim job search websites made by Muslims for Muslims. Muslims also achieve significant results in performance arts, like theatre (e.g. Khayaal, a professional theatre company specialising in performing traditional Islamic plays), music (e.g. Sami Yusuf, who performs Islamic devotional songs, called nasheeds, or even Muslim rap groups like Mecca2Medina,

or artists like Mos Def or Native Deen), art and sport. They are also creating mass media sources, which reflect Muslim interests and points of view (e.g. Muslim News, Muslim Weekly, Islam Channel).[31] "Muslim cool" has also started expressing itself in fashion. There are more and more Muslim designers who create clothing that not only look modest but also nice and fashionable. Some even produce items with quotes from the Qur'an or other symbols of a person's religious affiliation.[32] It also manifests itself in the online activities of young Muslims (see the next section), where they use the Internet and social media to produce poetry, art and read religious lectures.

This phenomenon represents an attempt by young Muslims to maintain their European and Muslim identities without giving up either.[33] In this case, the goods they buy, clothing they wear, music they listen and shows they watch – all things they consume – not only satisfy their practical needs but serve as a means to tell the world who they are. Being a European Muslim now means belonging to a certain subculture with its own lifestyle, norms and rules.[34] So, in a way, a phenomenon of "jihadi cool" can be regarded as an offshoot of "Muslim cool", with a stronger emphasis on the strict interpretation of religion and the military aspect. This is an important remark to make because, as I mentioned before, jihadism and ISIS's version of its presentation and promotion tended to be viewed as something extraordinary and exceptional. If, however, we admit that the group and its supporters behave a way similar to other subculture and even have their origins, it makes it much easier to not only understand it but also find an effective solution.

As it has become clear, indeed, ISIS "fanboy" and "fangirls" formed the community where they can discuss the important topics depicting their high level of morality, they speak the same language and exchange the same types of jokes and visual symbols that emerged directly from ISIS's stories and reflect both on the message the group spreads and the way how it presents it. As mentioned, of course, belonging to the same community is going to strengthen the newly acquired identities of ISIS's supporters – they find themselves in an echo-chamber where their ideas (adopted from ISIS) are further confirmed and reinforced as so are their identities. At the same time, the emergence of a subculture helps them feel distinct and different compared to other individuals and thus the idea of being special and unique that I refer to each chapter again becomes particularly evident. The literature on branding also claims that subculture does not only enhances the feeling of belonging that is so often emphasised by terrorism researchers when it comes to the reasons to join a terrorist group,[35] but it enhances the hedonic experiences of audiences (i.e. gives them the feeling of pleasure and excitement).[36] These positive feelings further strengthen the emotional connection with the brand.[37] ISIS, typically for a subculture, managed to create the "magic experience" of joint activities for its members.[38] They were made feel that they were a secret and closed group of heroes whose sacred mission was to save the world. Again, the style of this message would not differ much from marketing another episode of the *Avengers* film franchise, wherein one can see superheroes on a

mission yet having fun and enjoying life. Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger labelled this idea a "5-star jihad".[39] However, the authors mainly referred to the elements of "cool" but did not regard other cultural elements as important in ISIS's propaganda. Through shared interactions and symbols, they become more strongly convinced that the brand is capable of giving them the desired version of self, make them more "cool" and attractive, and thus it is absolutely necessary to keep the affiliation with it and make it even stronger.

Notes

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4 See Jan Christoffer Andersen and Sveinung Sandberg, 'Islamic State Propaganda: Between Social Movement Framing and Subcultural Provocation', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2018): 1–21.
5 Adam B. King, 'Finding Online Subcultures in Shared Meanings', *Social Science Computer Review* 26, no. 2 (2008): 137–151; Nathalie Chernoff and Sue Widdicombe, '"I Was Bored So…": Motivational Accounts of Participation in an Online Emo Group', *Journal of Youth Studies* 18, no. 3(2015): 305–321.
6 Richardson, *What Terrorists Want*, 62.
7 See Elizabeth Buner, 'Doing Our Part: Acknowledging and Addressing Women's Contributions to ISIS', *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law* 22, no. 2 (Winter 2016): 419–451; Anita Peresin, 'Why Women from the West Are Joining ISIS', *International Annals of Criminology* 56 (2018): 32–42; Anita Peresin and Alberto Cervone, 'The Western Muhajirat of ISIS', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 38, no. 7 (2015): 495–509; Lauren R. Shapiro and Marie-Helen Maras, 'Women's Radicalization to Religious Terrorism: An Examination of ISIS Cases in the United States', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, nos. 1–2 (2019): 88–119.
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9 R. Edgar and Gwynned de Looijer, 'The Islamic Dream Tradition and Jihadi Militancy,' in *Jihadi Culture*, 129.
10 Rosenbaum-Elliott et al., *Strategic Brand Management*, 204.
11 Burgh-Woodman and Brace-Govan, 'We Do Not Live to Buy': 202.
12 Andersen and Sandberg, 'Islamic State Propaganda': 11.
13 David S. Sorenson, 'Confronting the "Islamic State". Priming Strategic Communications: Countering the Appeal of ISIS', *Parameters* 44, no. 3 (2014): 28.
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15 Jihadi memes, Twitter post, 26 May 2014, 10.42 a.m., https://twitter.com/JihadiMemes/status/470862464767102977.

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6 Feeling No Regret

Guilt-Coping Mechanisms in ISIS's Propaganda

Once a person has made a choice, they will have to face its consequences. When the choice is made under the influence of emotions, it is very common for a person to feel guilt, anxiety, and regret.[1] Often, it happens because the decision was made based on a feeling of excitement and euphoria experienced at the time. People were too focused on the dream about "a perfect self" that they will ignore all rational considerations that could have stopped them from the rushed decision at that time. As shown, these feelings were carefully created and nurtured by the brand through advertising, which marketed the product for an individual. However, once a person faces reality, they may face a bitter awakening. They may realise that they just spent all their money on a new iPhone and that their family will not have anything to eat. Or that those "amazing shoes" that seemed to be able to transform "a pumpkin into a princess" are actually terribly uncomfortable and there is nothing to wear them with.

When one examines social media accounts managed by ISIS supporters spanning 2014–2016, one finds a large number of tweets praising the life in the Caliphate. ISIS supporters shared how excited and happy they were to be there and, therefore, did not show any signs of regret. Whether it is a coincidence or not, a lot of these people – such as Mohammed Emwazi ("Jihadi John") – seemed to have well-defined practical reasons to join the group. Emwazi, for example, was in the scope of attention of MI5 long before he joined the group for his alleged links with jihadi fighters in the Middle East.[2] However, as I mentioned earlier, MI5 did not charge him with anything, instead following him around and calling him to one interrogation after another, which resulted in the break of his life and marriage plans and expectedly deep disappointment and hatred for Britain.

Some people, however, became disillusioned with ISIS and indeed expressed their regret about joining the group or being involved in certain actions committed by ISIS. One example is Hamza Pervez, a British ISIS fighter who survived his time in Syria and is now being held in a Kurdish prison. Dubbed "Hungry Hamza" by tabloids, Pervez became most known not for his battlefield activities but for his tweets, in which he would confess his love for fast

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food and kittens. Pervez became one of the voices within the ISIS propaganda machine that showed the "normal" and "fun" life in the Caliphate.[3] In his interview with the BBC, he revealed his reasons for travelling to Syria as being "to help to build the state there as a civilian"[4] and that he "would never ever [have] joined the group" if he "knew the reality of it".[5]

Whether Pervez was genuine or not, there were people who truly did feel this way and over the years of ISIS's existence, we have heard of many cases when people tried to escape that "magical land" they used to be striving for. While ISIS did not hesitate to use violence and fear to prevent people from doing it, nevertheless, a scared member may not necessarily be a loyal member. Therefore, similar to brands, ISIS does not only need to create propaganda that is able to bring people in the state of emotional choice but also prevent them from losing their excitement and positive illusion. This is particularly important when a person leaves their fantasy world and faces reality – for example, they start preparing an attack and police notices and starts them or they travel to Syria and realise the rosy picture of the Caliphate is far from what they faced in reality. John Horgan, in his book *Walking Away from Terrorism*, mentions that psychological disillusionment is indeed one of the powerful factors for individual disengagement with a terrorist group. He argues that one of the factors contributing to this process is indeed the mismatch between the ideal picture presented by the group and the reality of it.[6]

In this case, the group might want to convince its supporters to stay. Some of these reasons may appeal to people's rationality, and some may appeal to the positive emotions that initially brought them into the group. When a customer makes an emotional choice, they may unconsciously attempt to use psychological tools to diminish negative feelings that follow this choice. Specifically, they would activate the mechanism of (post-hoc) rationalisation.

The rational choice is usually valued more than the emotional one; therefore, people would try to provide an argument for their choice to make it look rational. A person would try to prove (first of all to themselves) that they made the right choice despite doubts they might have, and/or despite clear evidence that it was not the best decision. They can do it in two ways: either try to find the facts that corroborate their decision (biased information search) or try to argue that their choice was bound to happen (hindsight bias).[7]

So, a person may explain their reasons for doing something. However, this explanation does not fully explain their motivations for a particular action. Rationalisation, therefore, "occurs when a person favours a particular conclusion as a result of some factor (such as self-interest) that is of little justificatory epistemic relevance if that factor then biases the person's subsequent search for, and assessment of, potential justifications for the conclusion".[8] There are two tests, which may be used to see whether a person engages in rationalisation:

> Counterfactual Test A:
> If the justifications offered had not been available to you, you would have sustained your approximate degree of confidence in P, either offering some other justification or abandoning the attempt to justify.
>
> Counterfactual Test B:
> If your preference had been absent, you would not have regarded those justifications as sufficient to render your approximate degree of confidence in P epistemically justified.[9]

In simpler words, if a person holds a certain strong judgement, they would always be looking for justifications for it or may stop justifying their choice at all. They also may not have accepted justifications they offered unless they are very biased in favour of certain judgement.

For example, a teacher is marking students' work and he gives one of the girls a B because she likes her as a person and finds her essay interesting. Another teacher, while marking the same student's work, finds a lot of mistakes and thinks that her argument is incoherent. She gives the student a C. When the first teacher is asked about the reason for giving the student a higher mark, he would come up with explanations like "she has a good writing style" or "an original idea is more important than grammar".[10] However, what is important is that these same explanations will not work with the essays of students the teacher does not like that much. This is the difference between a rational argument and a rationalised argument. A rationally produced argument will still be true in a different setting, while a rationalised explanation is used as a means to explain a specific type of behaviour in a specific situation.

The difficulty in exploring this aspect of emotional choice is rooted in the fact that such feelings as guilt, anxiety, and regret as well as the process of rationalisation are internal, that is, happening in a person's mind. This means that it is hardly possible to check whether ISIS supporters genuinely experienced these feelings, even if there was an opportunity to interview them in person. Many ISIS supporters are currently in prisons or awaiting trial; therefore, these conditions could significantly distort their answers and impact their objectivity. However, it is possible to examine how ISIS constructs justifications for its followers, facilitating the mechanism of rationalisation for them. The group essentially does the work for people by offering them readymade explanations that would help them cope with possible negative feelings and allow them to maintain their new identities, and thus their loyalty to the group.

One of the ways to do that, they argue, is to show that this feeling is inappropriate and that the consumer should instead focus on the pleasure afforded by the product consumption. The marketer would thus create a state of "guiltless hedonism" in the consumer who will then find delight in the enjoyment or the anticipation of enjoyment of the product, neither of which will be slighted by subsequent guilt.[11]

The variety of mechanisms that can help a brand do it is quite rich. In fact, we all know and use them when we feel guilty or regretful about something but at the same time, we do not quite want to admit this fact or accept that we did something wrong. These mechanisms are shifting the blame on to someone else; presentation of one's actions as justified and avoidance of presenting oneself in a negative light; and avoiding responsibility for one's actions.[12] The use of these tactics facilitates a process called "pseudo-self-forgiveness".[13] This refers back to the concept of rationalisation I've discussed earlier – people realise that something was done wrong and they need to do something about it. However, for whatever reason they are unable or unwilling to do so – it may be too painful psychologically or too costly (e.g. a person already moved to the Caliphate and now it is very difficult to leave). In this case, they resort to justifications (either created by themselves or taken from somewhere else, for example, ISIS) that are aimed to give them superficial relief. Interestingly, here again we can see how "normal" the techniques that ISIS used are: the group did not employ any secret tactics to keep the followers engaged. They again simply referred to the human nature and the behavioural patter that all of us tend to follow from time to time. I have examined again the texts of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* to demonstrate how exactly the group did it.

Thus, the leadership of ISIS seemed to be aware of the fact that not everyone may be inspired by the sight of people getting slaughtered. Thus, the editors of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* developed a very sophisticated set of explanations for the group's most violent and shocking acts *to avoid presenting themselves in a negative light.* The idea projected in this narrative is very simple: ISIS does not only not do anything wrong, it fulfils its obligation and its followers are the best and the most righteous people. This idea is often supported by references to the Qur'an and Hadith about the obligation of a Muslim, as well as by the works of approved religious scholars, who confirm the holiness of war against disbelievers. The visual design of articles dedicated to this topic would leave a required impression on the reader – one would often see religious symbols, handsome and brave-looking warriors, pictures of Paradise, light, and sky. Overall, one can see the development of the theme of "a sacred mission" that ISIS was trying to impose on its supporters in such a way as to present them not as criminals but as heroes and the followers of God's will.

Thus, in the third issue of *Dabiq: A Call for Hijrah*, the authors comment on Muslims' obligation to perform hijrah to Syria: "The best of the people on the earth are those who keep to the land of Ibrāhīm's hijrah, in contrast to those who pass through it or leave it".[14] In the same issue, the authors continue: "the sinful company affects you whether you desire or not. … One who abandons jihad … should be punished by hajr, since he did not assist the Muslims in righteousness and piety".[15]

Throughout the magazines' issues, ISIS sometimes would ask young people not to listen to their parents and women not to listen to their husbands, in case they do not share their sympathy for the group. ISIS tried to persuade its potential followers that it is not them who made a wrong and/or sinful move

by abandoning their families and not respecting their will; it is the families who are guilty of not assisting their fellow Muslims in building a better future for the ummah in the land of the Caliphate. Therefore, the group emphasises again the status of their recruits as "special" and "chosen". The group also attempts to reinforce the feeling of superiority of jihadists over other people (*kuffar*), which gives a further comforting explanation of why it is permissible to kill in the name of ISIS:

> And the kuffār can never be the equals of the Muslims even if both were to come from the same land. Then will We treat the Muslims like the criminals? What is the matter with you? How do you judge? [Al-Qalam: 35–36]. Or should we treat those who believe and do righteous deeds like corrupters in the land? Or should We treat those who fear Allah like the wicked?} [Sād: 28].[16]

Another example:

> From amongst the abrogated [verses] of the Qur'an [in recitation, not in legislation] was the verse, We only sent down wealth so that prayer would be established and zakāh would be given. By Ibn Rajab al-Hanbalī So the people of tawhīd and obedience to Allah are more deserving of wealth than the people of kufr in Allah and shirk. Therefore, they seized their wealth. He also made the provision of His Messenger from that wealth, because it is the purest of wealth, as He ta'āla said, So consume what you have taken of war booty [as being] lawful and good} [Al-Anfāl: 69].[17]

Tyler Welch expressed a similar idea about the importance for some of ISIS's followers to feel special. Welch also examined the narratives of *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* and came to the conclusion that heroism is one of the most frequent and powerful narratives in ISIS propaganda. The author argues that the group attempts to present itself as exceptional and righteous,[18] which consequently leads to the fact that ordinary human laws and norms do not apply to it.

In addition to this, ISIS promises all kinds of punishments from God for not listening to their call and "abandoning hijrah" and not following God.[19] The group claims that abandoning hijrah may make a person who professes to be a Muslim but refuses to exercise their direct religious duties a hypocrite. This is one of the most serious offences in Islam. For example:

> The evidences for the nullification of the dhimmī's covenant if he curses Allah, His book, His religion, or His Messenger, and the obligation to kill him and kill the Muslim who does the same are: the Qur'ān, the Sunnah, the ijmā' (consensus) of the Sahābah and the Tābi'īn, and analytical deduction [As-Sārim alMaslūl]. Amongst the evidences for this ruling is the statement of Allah (ta'ālā), And if they break their oaths after their treaty and defame your religion, then fight the leaders of disbelief, for

> indeed, there are no oaths [sacred] to them; [fight them that] they might cease [At-Tawbah: 12].[20]

Another example:

> … it should be known that voluntarily leaving Dārul-Islām for dārul-kufr is a dangerous major sin, as it is a passage towards kufr and a gate towards one's children and grandchildren abandoning Islam for Christianity, atheism, or liberalism. If one's children and grandchildren don't fall into kufr, they are under the constant threat of fornication, sodomy, drugs, and alcohol. If they don't fall into sin, they will forget the language of the Qur'ān – Arabic – which they were surrounded by in Shām, Iraq, Libya, and elsewhere, making the return to the religion and its teachings more difficult.[21]

For many young people, especially those who have just started practising Islam, a promise of punishment by God may have become a serious argument. For example, in one of his interviews, Jack Letts said that "it was a very emotionally-driven period of my life".[22] Picking up on this, his parents note:

> "All OCD is about fear, if you don't go through the rituals then something bad will happen," the Letts say. "In Islam that becomes, if you don't [live according to the religion] you are going to burn in hell. He was obsessed with not doing something wrong. That is why he wanted to learn Arabic so he could be the best Muslim he could be".[23]

They claimed that their son indeed had a phobia of ending up in hell if he did not obey all religious postulates.[24] Therefore, the reason why Jack joined the group must have been his attempt to apply the principles he learned in practice and to be a good Muslim in the way that ISIS portrayed it. So, the threats that ISIS was spreading in its magazines could definitely influence the mind of the young man who wanted to remain a good Muslim. This seems to be in line with the patterns discovered in the previous chapters. ISIS repeatedly mentioned throughout its magazines that "bad Muslims" (by their understanding) will be severely punished by God and by the Caliphate itself.

ISIS tries to maintain an idea that its followers are doing the right thing, even if everyone else argues the opposite. They link this to an idea of their exceptionalism and a feeling of being special. In addition, the group emphasises that any diversion from this path would displease God, who gave them their mission. Indeed, Shabbaz Suleman mentions in one of his interviews that when he realised that he wanted to leave the group, he felt very uneasy, as if he was betraying Islam and transforming into a hypocrite – something that ISIS presented as a terrible sin.[25]

In the justifications, discussed above, ISIS directly appeals to the desire to maintain the new "improved" identities and a new lifestyle associated with

them. The group is quite direct in telling its followers that if they do not follow its orders, they will become again who they were before they joined the group: ordinary people, bad Muslims, alienated citizens. Acceptance and participation in violence, in a way, becomes the price that recruits have to pay for being part of the "adventure".

The second tool that ISIS was using to keep prevent its supporters from disengaging was *presenting its actions as justified*. In its propaganda, ISIS attempts to present itself and its actions as legitimate from both political and religious points of view. Legitimacy is understood and projected in the magazines in two main themes: first, it is the "legitimacy of action", that is, ISIS is fulfilling God's will and therefore whatever it does is done to please Allah; second, legitimacy is also understood as political legitimacy, that is, ISIS is the only righteous Islamic regime in the Middle East and it is fighting against its enemies, therefore, violence against them is justified.[26]

On the one hand, the reference to legitimacy, especially to its political aspect, provides logical explanations for its actions. A lot of statements made by the group confirm an argument made by Haroro Ingram that the group indeed attempts to appeal to its potential recruits' rationality and offers them an alternative reality in which to live.[27]

On the other hand, when the group speaks about legitimacy, it also often links it to religion and tries to prove that its actions are not only permissible and justified but required by Allah. Therefore, the group links the idea of legitimacy back to the idea of being "chosen" by God and fulfilling His will, and therefore further reinforces the identities adopted by its followers.

One of these cases was related to the murder of American journalist James Foley. The footage of his execution marked the beginning of the rise of ISIS. While the group would show the gruesome videos all over the Internet, it nevertheless seemed to be aware of the reputational damage this may have caused. Thus, after the execution of Foley, ISIS published an article in *Dabiq* titled "Foley's Blood on Obama's Hands". The article argues that the death of Foley was the fault of himself, America and Obama. Thus, the author writes that Foley

> knew that Americans were not welcome in Muslim lands because of their government's shameless and lengthy record of aggression against Muslims. Nevertheless, he entered Syria carrying along with him items used for espionage, which were also found in his possession at the time of his capture.[28]

The author of that article argues that Foley was arrested for espionage and this was communicated to the Obama administration in November 2013. ISIS was trying to agree on the fate of Foley (according to its version). However, the American government did not make any attempt to negotiate and behaved arrogantly and aggressively. The group particularly stressed the fact that when two of its demands were met, many European prisoners were released,

proving that ISIS keeps its word. But Americans "hit the last nail in James's coffin and killed him by bombing Iraq".[29] The message that ISIS was trying to convey, therefore, is that the group had legitimate reasons to execute Foley as a spy; however, it had not wanted to do that. It did everything to prevent it, but the American government simply "made" them do it with its aggressive behaviour.

The same rhetoric persists, as the group started capturing and killing more hostages. The group published an advertisement in *Dabiq*, suggesting the payment of ransom for Danish and Japanese prisoners. Ransom was not paid and the hostages were executed. The group then published an announcement about it, saying that "prisoners were executed after being abandoned by the kafir nations and organisations".[30]

A similar explanation was offered for one of the most terrifying acts of violence committed by ISIS. In 2015, it burnt alive a captured Jordanian pilot, Muath Safi Yousef al-Kasasbeh. ISIS claimed that the decision to execute him was only made after the Jordanian government executed several jihadists, including women. The main reason for the murder was, however, "retaliation for his involvement in the crusaders' bombing campaign, which continues to result in the killings of countless Muslims, who as a result of these strikes are burnt alive and buried under mountains of debris".[31] The picture of the burnt body of al-Kasasbeh was followed by pictures of a burnt bodies of a young child and a Muslim man. There was a clear intention to show the readers that the explanation provided by ISIS was valid. As is known, using fire for execution/punishment is not allowed, as this right is reserved for Allah. Therefore, the actions of ISIS were un-Islamic. This would undermine its legitimacy as defenders of Islam. Therefore, ISIS engaged in a very long and wordy discussion about why burning people alive is permissible. It is hard to believe, but they managed to come up with an explanation, which could be quite convincing for those who would want to believe it (as mentioned earlier, one of the signs that people are rationalising is their desire to find supporting arguments for their beliefs, no matter what).[32] ISIS, in this case, referred to one of the religious postulates that claimed that an enemy should be punished with the same weapon as they used to inflict harm (in the case of al-Kasasbeh, it is fire).[33] For example:

> Whoever commits murder using something is to likewise be killed by it. There was a difference of opinion on the issue, and the majority hold that he is to be killed with the like of that by which he committed the murder, whether by a stone, a cane, drowning, strangling, etc., as long as he did not commit murder with something entailing fisq, such as sodomy or alcohol, in which case he is to be killed by the sword. Their evidence is this hadith, as well as His statement, "So whoever has transgressed against you, then assault him in the same way that he has assaulted you" (Al-Baqarah 194), and His statement, "For wounds there is qisas" (Al-Maidah 45), and the reality of qisas [retribution] is to be equal in deed.[34]

Moreover, in another magazine issue (a few months after the execution happened), the group published a long article that argued that even though Islam forbids using fire as a weapon, "in reality" it does not. The idea is supported by several relevant historical examples.[35] ISIS, therefore, flipped the Islamic postulate and cherry-picked ideas that fit with its ideology. While a rational mind would have already picked up on controversies in the group's explanations, their emotionally mobilised recruits only need an explanation that looks at least plausible in order to continue supporting them.

A similar logic applies to further ideas about the necessity to kill infidels. While for most human beings, killing each other is quite difficult psychologically, it becomes different when you do not consider your adversary a human. This seems to be a way by which ISIS managed to mobilise so many young people not only to fight on the battlefield against other soldiers but also against civilians in Europe and the Middle East, including women and children. Since the group had a clear division between the "good people" (Muslims) and the "evil people" (everyone who did not share its beliefs), killing the latter is permissible even if they are the most vulnerable members of society.

One of the most popular targets, not only in a physical but also in a verbal sense, is, of course, people from the West, *kuffar*. The group had developed a whole religiously supported theory on why it is permissible to kill people in Europe and America. Lorenzo-Dus, Kinzel and Walker, in their research, show that the group is not particularly original and creates an image of the hostile "other", whose only goal is to harm righteous Muslims and Islam. However, they emphasise that since ISIS was based in the Middle East and had to fight over recruits against other groups, the group was focusing more on discrediting Middle Eastern regimes and Muslims who do not support them rather than the West.[36] One of the articles in *Rumiyah* was even called "The Kafir's Blood Is Halal for You, So Shed It".[37] The idea of the article is not original; it cites a Moroccan guerrilla military leader, al-Khattabi, who once said that "The kafir's blood is permissible because it has not yet uttered the word of tawhid, but if he were to say it, then his blood is spared and becomes prohibited".[38] So, the group, on the one hand, indicates the enemy and the necessity to fight them. At the same time, it pretends to be fair and claims that if its "enemies" accept Islam, it would save their lives. In such a way, the group earns trust among its potential recruits – if someone tries to argue that ISIS kills everyone who disagrees with it, this would serve as a strong argument against it.

ISIS does not specify who the author of these words was – it might be a deliberate attempt to delude the readers. ISIS may have expected most of its readers to consider this person a religious scholar (i.e. an authority). In further issues of *Rumiyah*, ISIS makes references to the Qur'an and the words of Muhammed containing orders to "kill all mushrikin"[39] (pagans) whenever possible. Islam, the group claims, is not a religion of peace. The group proves it with a citation from the Qur'an in which Allah once said to the angels, "I will cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieved, so strike them from

upon the necks and strike from them every fingertip".[40] In another issue, the group refers to Jesus saying, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword".[41] Another example cites a long quote from the Qur'an:

> So the command of Allah – to which obedience is due as a religious duty – is to fight until there is no fitnah, i.e. evident shirk in the obedience of Allah, and until no manifest authority is given to any rule except to that of the True King. His saying, "if they cease", means that if they submit or surrender, then they are to be left alone. This can either be in the form of repentance to Allah and abiding by His worship alone or by the paying of jizyah while remaining upon subjugated kufr, just as Allah said, regarding the command of killing the mushrikin in general, "Then if they repent, establish the prayer, and pay the zakah, then leave them alone" (At-Tawbah 5), and He said that the People of the Book – those who "do not adhere to the true din" – should specifically be fought "until they pay the jizyah willingly, while they are humiliated" (At-Tawbah 29). And "there is no aggression except against the tyrants" means those who did not submit nor surrender, either through repentance or dhimmah, the covenant of jizyah. Thus, anyone who is neither a Muslim nor a dhimmi kafir (while still a tyrant against himself, deserving both hatred and humiliation) is a hostile tyrant deserving aggression. This is because shirk itself is dhulm (tyranny), as Allah said, "And when Luqman said to his son, admonishing him, 'O my son, do not commit shirk with Allah. Verily shirk is a great tyranny'" (Luqman 13). And although the people of dhimmah are mushrikin from the People of the Book, their shirk is subjugated and humiliated under the Shari'ah of Allah enforced upon them.[42]

So, the group seemed to try to persuade its supporters that killing in the name of religion (any religion) is not only acceptable but also necessary; and if one wants to be a good Muslim, it is time to pick up a sword. The same idea was expressed by researcher Kasun Ubayasiri, who, in his analysis of *Dabiq*, demonstrates how ISIS attempts to create a frame of violence being "integral to Islamic identity" and, therefore, logical and natural.[43] Thus, in the interview with Sky News, Shamima Begum, the already mentioned one of three Bethnal Green girls who in 2015 left Britain to become jihadi brides,[44] said that she had no problems with beheadings that ISIS conducted, as she heard that "Islamically it's all allowed".[45] This sounds in line with what ISIS had been arguing in its propaganda. As shown, the group made a lot of efforts to link its idea of jihad to Qur'anic postulates, to make it sound legitimate. In a discussion with the BBC, Begum openly says that she adopted the justification offered by ISIS to explain the reasons for killing innocent people.

Speaking about fighting against infidels, ISIS also emphasises that the "war booty is more lawful than any other income … as it is seized from one

who does not deserve it because he uses it to aid himself in disobeying Allah and associating others with Him".[46] The group also argues that the wealth captured by its fighters is given to them by Allah:

> Some Muslims today may not like taking the wealth of the kuffar by force and may feel that the wealth they obtain doing other work is better, and this is incorrect, for the best of halal according to the text of the Quran is ghanimah, and it was the provision of the Prophet after his hijrah to Madinah. Allah created this wealth for the sons of Adam so they could use it to aid them in obeying Him and worshiping Him, so if anyone uses it to aid him in disbelieving in Allah and committing shirk with Him, Allah gives power to the Muslims over him and they take it from him and return it to those who have more right to it – those who worship Allah, obey Him, and practice tawhid. For this reason it was named "fay", due to it returning to those who have more right to it and for whom it was created.[47]

In another example, the group clearly states that it is permissible to kill certain Muslims:

> And it is permissible to kill National Security officers and all members of the police – regardless of whether you make takfīr of them on an individual level or you make takfīr of them on a general scale – if that occurs during the course of a campaign of fighting in which sniping them becomes a means for you to cause damage to them for the benefit of the jihād. This is because a resistant apostate faction is fought as one. It is permissible to kill those of them who are fleeing, and to finish off those of them who are wounded; and this would be an act of killing one whose individual condition was unknown. This is the rule because distinguishing the condition of individuals is done if they are maqdūr 'alayhim (under the power of Muslims); these individuals are not maqdūr 'alayhim. So the obligatory defensive jihād is not to be disrupted for the sake of distinguishing the condition of individuals [al-Liqā' al-Maftūh – al-Halqat al-Ūlā].[48]

ISIS, therefore, not only legitimised the "war" that involves the unpleasant practices of killing people, it also legitimised the reward for it. Bearing in mind that some of the group's recruits were petty criminals before joining it,[49] it is not surprising that they may have admired an idea that they were not committing a crime but taking what they deserved. At the same time, in all of the examples discussed above, ISIS did not simply present its actions as justified, it also constantly emphasises that it is not them who waged the war against "crusaders", but the "crusaders" who started it. It is the "crusaders" who keep committing atrocities against Muslims, offend Allah, attack the Caliphate and pollute the world with their sins. For example: "Crusaders

continue to reveal their hatred and animosity towards Islam through their relentless bombings and drone strike campaigns on the IS".[50] Therefore, the group was also using such mechanisms as *shifting the blame to someone else*. An example from the group' magazine describes the crimes of the West (especially the United States) and establishes the obligation of every righteous Muslim man to fight against it:

> The US had killed women, children, and the elderly, during its direct occupation of Iraq prior to its withdrawal. There are countless accounts of American soldiers executing families and raping women under the sanctity of the US military and Blackwater. Muslim families were killed under the broad definition of "collateral damage," which the US grants itself alone the right to apply. Therefore, if a mujāhid kills a single man with a knife, it is the barbaric killing of the "innocent". However, if Americans kill thousands of Muslim families all over the world by pressing missile fire buttons, it is merely "collateral damage"…[51]

Indeed, Jack Letts fought on the frontline, got severely injured and wanted to engage in a martyrdom operation all for the sake of the cause of ISIS. He admitted that he considered himself the "enemy of Britain" at the time.[52] So, while he insisted that he was not involved in killings, he confirmed the influence of ISIS's ideas on him and that he was an active part of their military squads. There are, therefore, several patterns of ISIS-constructed justifications that could be seen in Jack's explanation of his choices. First, one can see an idea of the religious duty to help his fellow Muslims that was so actively promoted by the group. He also did acknowledge that he considered himself at war against Britain at a certain point, which means that justifications regarding the superiority of pro-ISIS Muslims over *kuffar* did reach him.

ISIS was using religious references to justify their actions and soften the worries of its recruits. Several researchers who examined the group's magazines emphasise the role of religious narrative too. Kasun Ubayasiri and Erkan Toguslu, for example, also argue that the narrative of religion and "Allah's will" was used to establish the group's legitimacy.[53] It is important to note, however, that while the group does not change the content of Qur'anic quotes, it de-contextualises them by only focusing on the aspects related to warfare and ignoring the rest. It also does not mention the multiple ways in which sur'ahs could be translated, and, therefore, only adopt the meanings that are beneficial for its cause. A similar conclusion was reached by Thomas Frissena, Erkan Toguslub, Pieter Van Ostaeyenc and Leen d'Haenensa, who also note that Qur'anic verses are only interpreted in the context of early Islam, and therefore, the tenets that were relevant to that period are no longer relevant to contemporary Islam.[54]

In several other magazines, the authors of articles were using an interesting tool: they would write articles addressed directly to "infidels". The group often speaks to its followers directly, but why would it speak with its enemies? It is

unlikely that the group targeted *kuffar* with its texts. The articles addressed to the West explain why ISIS considers it an enemy and fights it. Thus, ISIS tells the West: we hate you because: "1) you deny the oneness of Allah; 2) your societies allow things that Allah prohibited; 3) your disbelief in [the] Lord; 4) crimes against Islam; 5) crimes against Muslims; 6) invading in our lands".[55] In another article, the group says the following:

> O Americans, and O Europeans, the IS did not initiate a war against you, and your governments, as your governments and media try to make you believe. It is you who started the transgression against us, and thus you deserve blame and you will pay a great price.[56]

However, in this, ISIS are good people, they do not want to harm "infidels". They fight to "bring you true freedom from being enslaved to your whims and desires … to bring you out of darkness".[57] This cause may seem noble enough to justify the killings of innocent people in the eyes of some impressionable young people: they are building a better future, which does sometimes require sacrifices. It seems like addressing the West in the first person is used mainly to produce a dramatic and emotional effect on its potential recruits. The text reads as if the oppressed raised their voices against their oppressors. Besides, many of ISIS's recruits were based and born in the West. Reading this accusatory text addressing the West may provoke a stronger feeling of hatred towards it, and a desire for readers to distance themselves from such a sinful society.

Former members of the infamous ISIS execution cell nicknamed "the Beatles" for their British accents, Alexanda Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh, are a good example of the work of this mechanism. While these people might not necessarily have been following the trajectory described in the emotion-driven choice model, they do show that ISIS used a variety of justifications to trigger someone's rationalisation mechanism. So, ISIS used the same tools for those of its recruits who were emotionally drawn to it and for those who were attracted to it by rational motivations. The reason I consider "the Beatles" to be different is that their background story was significantly different to those of Jack Letts or Shamima Begum. The latter did not display any signs of radicalisation[58] at all before her travel to Syria. They all seemed to be doing relatively well in their lives before they discovered ISIS videos. In contrast, all members of the infamous jihadi cell may have been radicalised before they found out about ISIS. Thus, as I mentioned before, Mohammed Emwazi, "Jihadi John", who was killed in an airstrike, was in the scope of MI5 attention as a potential extremist, and Alexanda Kotey travelled to Gaza with a humanitarian convey, some of the members of which were detained under the charge of extremism before the convoy departed.[59] El Shafee Elsheikh's brother was arrested on charges of killing a gang member and sentenced to ten years in prison, which, according to his mother, made him vulnerable for radicalisation, and he was eventually introduced to a radical imam by his friend.[60] "The Beatles" then travelled to Syria to join Al Qaeda and later defected to ISIS.[61] The story

of Kotey and Elsheikh, in a way, seems to be a classic case of radicalisation scenarios described by McCauley and Moskalenko, Sageman and others.[62] However, there are certain elements of the emotion-driven choice that could also be detected in their interviews. Thus, they do emphasise that they did not have problems with applications of Sharia law punishments, as this is part of Islam.[63] They also link their reasoning to join ISIS to religious obligations.

El Shafee Elsheikh formulated it like this: "When I became practicing Muslim, I realised that there is an obligation upon you … and in 2011–2012 there was no place that needed more help than Syria."[64] When the journalist asked him again why he abandoned Europe while most Syrians would like to come there, El Shafee Elsheikh said that Syrians want to come to the UK because they do not know the realities of living there. He added: "People who come to Aleppo from Europe are jealous of people who live there … they are self-sufficient, they keep close to their families, there is no as much evil and corruption in these societies… Every country has corruption but nothing beats the West".[65] Janan Moussa, who conducted this interview, later noted that El Shafee is "a very angry man and he hates the West".[66] Alexanda Kotey expressed similar feelings. He would accuse the West of hypocrisy, atrocities against Muslims in the Middle East and corruption.[67] He also talked about his early experiences of travelling to the Middle East (Gaza) and the strong psychological effect it had on him when he saw people being killed and oppressed by Israel, as well as by dictators in other countries such as Libya or Tunisia.[68]

Other enemies of true Muslims are "devil-worshipping" Yazidis, who, according to ISIS's claims, should be among the main targets for extermination for their "deviant" beliefs:

> Their [Yazidi] creed is so deviant from the truth that even cross-worshipping Christians for ages considered them devil worshippers and Satanists, as is recorded in accounts of Westerners and Orientalists who encountered them or studied them. It is ultimately ironic that Obama sites [sic] these devil worshippers as the main cause for his intervention in Iraq and Shām, as he sides with the peshmerga – gangs of mercenaries related to the Marxist PUK and allied with the Marxist PKK – a "terrorist" organization according to the tāghūt laws the West "believes" in.[69]

ISIS also raised the topic of killing other Muslims. Here, ISIS offered a whole array of different explanations, which sound quite vague and undefined to an outsider. One aspect of it is the "apostate regimes" in the Middle East, which cooperate with "crusaders" and "*kuffar*". The main narrative here is that these regimes commit crimes against Muslims and therefore it is permissible to target them. For example: "The taghut regime of Al Saud … executes dozens of great men whose only offense was preaching tawhid and waging jihad in the path of Allah".[70] It is also permissible to target anyone who is waging the war against the "true Islam", including women and children.[71]

When speaking about Shi'a Muslims, ISIS notes: "Rafidah are the Jews of the Ummah. Some of them are Jews who fake Islam to spread their deviance, just as Paul of the Jews faked Christianity to spread his deviance".[72] Or:

> Az-Zuhrī (rahimahullāh – d. 124AH) said, "No deviance was innovated after the advent of Islam more harmful to its people than Irjā [AshSharī'ah – Al-Ājurrī]'. Mansūr Ibn al-Mu'tamir (rahimahullāh – d. 133AH) said, 'The Murji'ah and the Rāfidah are the enemies of Allah [Al-Lālikā'ī]".[73]

Since these are not real Muslims, it means they can be killed without any reservations.

The group also claims that there are "true" Muslims (the followers of IS) who support the Caliphate and understand the necessity for jihad, and "others" against whom it is permissible to fight:

> These du'at couldn't grasp the idea that Islam could have a state and an imam, nor could they begin to understand what it would cost to achieve this. It was as if they'd never studied the history of Islam and learned what this endeavour would require of us in terms of blood. It was as if they weren't aware that amongst those who are liable to have their bloodshed for the sake of this cause are fellow Muslims who testify that la ilaha illallah. However, these Muslims are renegades whom it's permissible to fight, and for no reason other than the fact that they refuse to give bay'ah [allegiance] to one imam or another.[74]

And another one:

> If someone were to say: "You extremists have applied the verses revealed regarding the kuffār and mushrikīn upon the Muslims of this era, and haven't considered the difference between the two", we would respond that describing many of the people of this era as Muslims because they say "lā ilāha illallāh" should not be an obstacle to seeing something the way it is or describing the situation as it deserves to be described. That is because many of those who say "La ilāha illallāh" have fallen into different shades of shirk at all levels, including shirk in tawassul and du'ā', shirk in obedience, ruling and legislation, and shirk in love, support and allegiance. And if we were to unconditionally affirm the Islam of many people today, without understanding the reality of the different shades of shirk that they've fallen into, we would be very far from reality, and would be satisfied with negligence and inaction rather than analyzing and correcting the situation. And this is not from the characteristics of the believers.[75]

And one more:

> Al-Bukhārī and Muslim reported on the authority of Abū Qilābah who said that Anas Ibn Mālik (radiyallāhu ʻanh) said, ʻA group of people from ʻUkal or ʻUraynah (two tribes) came to Madīnah and then got stomach sickness. So, the Prophet (sallallāhu ʻalayhi wa sallam) ordered them a she-camel that produced much milk and told them to drink from her urine and milk. They did so. When they got healthy, they killed the Prophet's shepherd and led the camels away with them. The news then reached the Prophet in the early morning, so he sent after them. Prior to noon, they were captured and brought to him. He ordered their hands and their feet be cut off, their eyes be put with hot iron, and they be thrown out on al-Harrah (an area covered with black stones near Madīnah), so they would ask for water to drink, but not be given any water, until they died. Abū Qilābah said, "These people thieved, killed, disbelieved after their faith, and waged war against Allah and His Messenger". This hadīth shows the severity of the prophetic punishment against the treacherous, false claimants of Islam. The wicked deeds of Shu'aytāt were similar to those mentioned in the hadīth, except that the Shu'aytāt clans decided to arrogantly and collectively shield the perpetrators and thereby share the blame for treachery and murder.[76]

Interestingly, in the later issues of its magazines, ISIS softened the rhetoric regarding women and children and sounded almost apologetic. Instead of arguing that it is okay to kill them if they try to kill you, now the group claims that these victims were "unintentional as it is difficult to distinguish between combatants and non-combatants".[77] This change happened towards the end of the existence of the *Rumiyah* magazine and was probably a result of a drop in their popularity online, and the necessity of bringing the followers back. Thus, Max Abrahms, in his book *Rules for Rebels*, also argued that brutal violence committed by the group against Muslims disgusted a lot of its potential supporters, even if they shared its ideas.[78] In its war-mongering rhetoric, ISIS often talks about its military victories. According to Harleen K. Gambhir, these references also carry a particular meaning. The group presents its victories as a sign of God's approval of its mission.[79] This, therefore, further strengthens the major narrative of the exceptional mission ISIS and its supporters are entitled to, and thus would give its supporters another reason to remain part of the group.

Another guilt-relieving mechanism ISIS used was *denying responsibility for one's actions*. This was enacted through an idea of an obligation to obey an imam. The group emphasises that citizens of the Caliphate must obey the will of Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (who is referred as an imam) and puts it as follows: "Whoever pledges allegiance to an imam, giving him his hand in sincerity, should obey him as much as he is able to. And if another man comes forward disputing his legitimacy, then strike that other man's neck".[80]

While, on the one hand, this further strengthens ISIS's claim for legitimacy, it also allows its followers to say that the Caliph's will is superior to their personal judgements, and they should not feel guilty or anxious about their actions. In one of his interviews, El Shafee Elsheikh expressed the same idea. Answering the question of why he did not resist if he did not agree with everything ISIS was doing, he said that it is a religious obligation for a good Muslim to obey the orders of his imam, regardless of whether he agrees with him or not.[81]

As demonstrated, ISIS has developed quite an elaborate system of justifications that helps it keep recruits. The final question that needs to be answered here, however, is why do some recruits still disengage? The examples of Jack Letts and Shamima Begum show that people who might have been emotionally driven to ISIS actually do tend to disengage with the group later. Several researchers have suggested that customers who have a stronger emotional connection with a brand are more likely to become its strong antagonists.[82] This normally happens when a "critical incident"[83] takes place, meaning that a brand does something that is perceived as a violation of customer's trust ("service failure"). The customers, therefore, stop perceiving a brand as sincere.[84] This moment is individual and can vary from one customer to another. Indeed, if one looks at Tooba Gondal or Jack Letts, who both argued that they were driven to ISIS by their desire to be better Muslims, their passion for ISIS was over once they travelled there and saw the discrepancy between the group's rhetoric and reality.[85] Oppositely, Alexanda Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh, who were already radicalised and moved to ISIS from another group,[86] only lost their loyalty to ISIS after they spent a few years in prison.[87]

As this discussion demonstrates, ISIS was not simply trying to promote its ideology in the most attractive way. The group seemed to be aware of the reputational risks that its videos and media coverage could have brought to it and invested a lot of effort in mitigating this. Like some other brands, the group was trying to convince its followers that they should not feel guilty or ashamed for their decision to join ISIS. The group offered a variety of reasons explaining to its followers that they are not only allowed to do what they do but also obliged to. The explanations are based on basic guilt-coping mechanisms that are meant to give recruits the feeling of "pseudo-self-forgiveness" and "guiltless hedonism". ISIS provides its supporters with justifications that should help them suppress any negative feelings that they may have and focus on the excitement that they once felt when first came across the message of ISIS.

Notes

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Conclusion

Breaking the Terrorist Brand

"Some brands are purchased because they represent something special to us as individuals or they convey something important to others about us. When we can't actually say what that is 'yet we just know' we call that symbolic."[1] This quote summarises the idea that I have been exploring on the pages of this book. The model of emotional choice that I applied to the case of ISIS showed how terrorist groups may build their propaganda in a brand-like manner – using the same techniques, pursuing the same goals and getting the same outcome.

ISIS constructed its propaganda to appeal to its potential supporters' desire for self- and social symbolism. This means that ISIS tried to present itself as able to provide its propaganda with means that would help them to construct their identities. The difference in the branding approach compared to other identity-based theories, however, is that these identities may not necessarily express the people's self-perception. Rather it is a desire to project an attractive image. These images should be admired both by the target audience themselves and by their significant circle of connections.

ISIS, like a brand, offers these images to their potential supporters. There are four images I was able to identify in ISIS propaganda (or advertisement): true believer (good Muslim), superman, superwoman and a stranger. There is also a fifth image of a martyr, which can be considered in conjunction with "superman" as a more advanced (according to ISIS) version of it. It would be correct to say that the image of the martyr has a mobilisational purpose. While there is a lot in common between the images of superman (mujahid) and martyr, the latter is presented as the highest in the hierarchy. ISIS tries to convince young people that dying for the group is the highest feat and the biggest achievement. If a superman stands above all other people, martyrs stand above even supermen, as they are granted God's approval and rewarded with Paradise and many other "benefits". So, if a person wants to continue their spiritual journey and development, martyrdom is something they should look for. An idea of martyrdom can also sometimes be encountered in relation to the Muslim community in general. ISIS, therefore, presents Muslims as deserving Paradise because of all the sufferings they have to go through. The images of true believer, superman (martyr) and superwoman represent

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a combination of religious ideas and more general ideas of what it means to achieve self-improvement and personal success. The group convinces its followers that by joining it they become better than anyone else, and that they will almost be granted special powers that they should use to carry out their special mission of "saving" Islam and the ummah.

The group also addressed some people's feelings of not belonging to society through the image of a "stranger". As mentioned, some young Muslims may not feel that they fit well into society and/or their peer group. ISIS plays on this feeling by offering an image of a stranger that derives from the Qur'an. ISIS showed that feeling alien and a misfit is a normal for a true Muslim, as they are morally superior to other people, and their pure souls simply cannot stand the sin and dirt of the West and of "apostates" that live around them.

There are several things that one can notice about all of these images. One of the most important observations is that they are quite generic, that is, can be relevant to almost everyone. While some researchers and theologians[2] argue that ISIS has nothing to do with Islam, nevertheless, the core of its propagandist message is built around religious ideas that are taken from Qur'an. Unlike it is sometimes claimed, ISIS did not distort Qur'anic verses; they were presented accurately, however, the group often decontextualised them, that is, presented them literally without providing a comment about what exactly a particular postulate would have referred to, which did often distort their original meaning. What is more important here is that while all the images the group was promoting did have a religious background, at the same time they would encompass a much larger audience. The group was interested in mass recruitment, and it did need to come up with a message that would be relevant to as many people as possible. So, the images it was offering are quite broad and presented as simple role models for being good people, which a lot of young Muslims (and non-Muslims too) could be searching for. Namely, the group made an idea of "Muslim" not only religious but rather cultural – highting all the positive characteristics and benefits that being a Muslim would entail, specifically focusing on how Muslims are better, morally more superior and more advanced than the rest of the world. The images, therefore, rather represent a version of an "ideal (or likeable) person" many people would like to project mixed with the religious aspect and a hint of glamour and "coolness". So, the message ISIS was sending to their potential supporters in the very simple words could be formulated like this: "Being with us will not only make you a better person it will make you cool and everyone will like you and will be jealous of you".

Having said that, I do not mean to argue to the previously made argument of ISIS propaganda being tailored to specific groups.[3] Quite the opposite, while it is difficult to prove empirically, my guess is the branding approach was most effective with recruitment of younger people who as I mentioned before are believed to be more susceptible to the influence of advertising by symbolic brands.

The second point that needs to be highlighted is that that these images do not or very rarely have any connection with violent actions. The largest part of the group's narrative is indeed about personal development, self-improvement and happiness. The violent aspect is introduced very cautiously and gradually as the indispensable part of those images. The group relies on its potential followers' holistic perceptions of the images – that if they like the idea overall, they would be more inclined to accept the details. And indeed, as I showed by quoting some of ISIS's former supporters, they did tend to evaluate their relationship with a group as a whole. Thus, when tabloids, for example, publish another article talking about "barbarism" of those who joined the group, it is important to remember that for most of these people, violence was not part of the equation. Their acceptance of violence would come at a late stage, when they already form the emotional connection with the "ISIS brand" and would consider it necessary to commit to it completely. The reason for this is that the images that a brand promotes are usually perceived holistically – thus people think that if they want to be "supermen" they need to fully accept and agree with everything that a brand (ISIS) does – otherwise they will not be able to fully achieve the desired image.

This shows how normal (and I am at risk of being severely criticised here) the ISIS approach is. Of course, I do not refer here to indiscriminate killings and tortures of people is not normal. Rather I am trying to emphasise that the message that the group was sending out had nothing to do with violence by itself. If we tried to forget who was the author of these recommendations, we could have easily agreed to every image description that the group had – it is necessary to be kind, it is good to love God, it is important to be supportive of other people.

Finally, all these images have a clear exaggeration in their presentation. ISIS gives each of these images an almost supernatural power and a perfection that a real person is simply not able to achieve. The group makes its followers feel like they are superhumans, capable of everything, standing above an average person. The group has created an augmented reality for its supporters, as if they were transported into a video game and provided with special powers. ISIS made its followers think that they could leave their ordinary life with all its problems and frustrations and move to a new one, in which they become a better, more "advanced" version of themselves.

Discovering different images in ISIS's propaganda shows that an argument made by many researchers about the importance of identity in people's motivations to become terrorist is true.[4] While explanations emphasising the role of identity are not new, this research has some differences. Most identity-based explanations have argued that the group used the concept of crisis in the Muslim ummah and the necessity to solve it.[5] However, in this book I showed that the idea of "crisis" may not always be the narrative that groups use to mobilise support. Instead, they can appeal to people's hedonistic motivations – the idea of being a "terrorist" becomes for some people less about

the true commitment to a particular cause, but rather about building a more attractive and "cooler" version of self.

I have also shown how ISIS managed to reach out its target audience and convince them in the quality and desirability of the proposed images. ISIS used the marketing technique of narrative advertising that helped ISIS to create an imaginary world or augmented reality for its supporters through a range of stories. The benefit of narrative advertising is that it is appealing to people's emotions rather than rationality and, therefore, makes it easier to present even a weak argument or an idea as a strong one. Like what we may see on TV commercials, ISIS used stories where the promoted images were integrated as protagonists. Most of the stories developed according to a traditional pattern: "everything was bad in the beginning but in the end the character becomes happy". These stories appeal to the group's target audience's experiences and desires and make them recognise themselves in those stories and associate themselves with the characters and eventually feel like they would like to replicate them in real life. They start feeling and forming an emotional connection with ISIS as an actor who does not only understand their needs and desires but also is capable to satisfy them.

This emotional connection is the key to understanding some young people's decision to join the group. As described throughout this book, the connection is based purely on emotions and the excitement that ISIS was able to render to its target audience. Similar to the excitement that we may get when we are invited to become a member of an exclusive club, ISIS supporters were excited about a perspective to become special and different (e.g. cooler or morally superior) from the rest of the people that the group offered them. They become immersed in an imaginary world, a fairy tale where they could be heroes, princesses and strong men. This excitement and the expectation of pleasure of acquiring something special or becoming someone "cool" led some young people towards becoming ISIS members despite possible negative consequences.

There are several things (or "hooks") that made the ISIS images desirable. One of them is the feeling of being special and exclusive or chosen by higher power for a special mission. Many of us would like to think that we are unique and different from other "ordinary" people, and that we came to this world with an important mission. Young ISIS supporters do not seem to be an exception, and the group happily gave them this impression: not only it was verbally perpetuating this idea but it also contributed to the creation of a subculture where this feeling of "specialness" was strengthened further through the use of special artefacts, language and the feeling that members are rebelling against powerful and evil powers. Further, the group gave them the impression that they are really the ones who are able to succeed because they have superpower – they are unstoppable, invincible and scary for the enemies and they possess all necessary skills to do that. Related to that is another "hook" – moral transformation. ISIS was telling its potential supporters – "even if in

your previous life you were a loser, with us you are going to be a winner". Isn't it the trope that many of us like so much in fictional stories and often associate ourselves with? This message is powerful, and ISIS knew that well. In addition to these three "hooks", there was the fourth, tailored specially for women. The group was offering them an opportunity to feel like heroines of fairy tales, where characters are always remarkably beautiful and feminine and yet are strong and powerful, capable of changing the world. Nowadays with the existing stereotype that a woman needs to give up her femininity to achieve success or vice versa, ISIS managed to offer their young female supporters both.

We could see the evidence of this effect of ISIS propaganda on its target audience when examining their social media accounts. One thing that is quite evident and that also serves proof that there is indeed an emotional connection between ISIS and its supporters based on their adoption of the suggested images is the way how they interact with each other. They call themselves "princesses", "lions", "heroes", and "queens" – in line with the narrative ISIS creates around these images. They use specific language and conversational style; they directly say that they believe ISIS supporters are better people than the others. Their conversations are also all focused around the topics that are somehow connected with the stories spread by ISIS – they are either about the battles, or the bravery of group members, or their love for God, or their hard life in the West, which magically transformed once they moved to the Caliphate.

The analysis of ISIS supporters' Twitter accounts' content and their conversations shows that they indeed "put on" new identities in their online world. Here one can see the different gender dynamics in the process of recruitment. When examining social media that belong to men, I could clearly see the important role of gender stereotypes. Joining ISIS makes men feel more masculine, strong and brave. The group's rhetoric, therefore, speaks directly with the young men's desire to restore their masculinity. The case of women is more complex. On the one hand, as shown, ISIS uses traditional tropes prescribing women to play a secondary role compared to men and mainly take care of the house and children. In parallel, however, there is another narrative – an opportunity for women to play an important and active role in the new society both by performing their traditional duties and by being given other responsibilities. The group, therefore, offers its female supporters an idea of a "real woman" – who is very feminine and beautiful but at the same time strong and powerful and plays an important role in the Caliphate. These new identities bring in positive feelings that are very explicit in ISIS's followers' conversations. One encompassing feeling they all have is the one of superiority over other people – "other people" being understood as almost everyone who does not share the ideology of ISIS, including Muslims, Shi'a Muslims, Westerners and Arab countries' leaders and representatives of other religions. This contradicts ISIS's attempt to present itself as a representative of all Muslims' interests. The superiority felt

by ISIS "fanboys" and "fangirls" is expressed in different ways, but it does demonstrate that they are comfortable and pleased with their new identities. They feel that there are far better Muslims than others and more righteous people than Westerners. They consider themselves as contributing to saving the ummah by fighting for Islam and Islamic State, unlike those Muslims who do not share ISIS's ideas. Male ISIS supporters feel that being part of the group makes them "real men", brave and unstoppable, real superheroes. Similarly, female ISIS supporters feel that they are superwomen who are engaged in "saving" their community and building a state where everyone could live under God's law. They also strongly emphasise their purity and righteousness compared to Muslim women who do not wear the niqab or hijab, and particularly Western women.

Both men and women have also incorporated into their identities the image of "strangers", promoted by ISIS. This is expressed through their feeling of being special and "chosen", which can be clearly seen throughout their interactions.

All these positive feelings are reinforced among ISIS followers through sharing visual images online (which visualises how they see themselves after they have joined the group). One can also notice that, as mentioned before, identity-based images spread by ISIS are perceived by its followers holistically, meaning that they do not separate them into the parts they like and the parts they do not like, but attempt to embody them as a whole. This explains why some young people continued supporting the group despite the horrific violence it committed.

One can see that there is a real community or subculture developed around the "ISIS brand". Sharing the same symbols, rituals and style does not only show the adoption of ISIS's message but it serves to its further strengthening – as its followers find themselves in a community that sees them the same way as they see themselves (i.e. like heroes, soldiers, supermen, beautiful strong women) This allows them to maintain the feeling of excitement and satisfaction these new identities give them (social symbolism). Another point here is that ISIS created a subculture branded as "cool", as an elite club. Under this condition, a simple human psychology works: like most of us, ISIS's followers become attracted to an idea of belonging to an exclusive and "cool" club. It can be compared to getting a Priority Pass card, which gives wealthy customers access to VIP lounges at airports: a space that is only open to the "chosen" ones.

What is interesting to point out is that when we step aside from the thought that this is subculture based on jihadist ideas, overall, it does not differ in any way from any other subculture. In the recent years, attention was drawn to the phenomenon of "Muslim cool" – a kind of subculture that unites Islam and Western pop culture that is used by young Western Muslims to express their identity. Jihadist subculture or "jihadi cool" seem to be one of its strands – its adherents focus on the strict interpretation of Islam and belligerent ideas, but at the same time they combine them with elements of pop culture that may

indicate again that strive for "coolness" and specialness attract them to ISIS more than the actual ideology.

Again, the feeling of excitement that some followers of terrorist groups have was detected before, in the theories focusing on adventure-seeking.[6] However, they seem to imply that certain people join terrorist groups due to such a trait as adventurism being a part of their personality. While this is undoubtedly true, it does not explain why there were so many young people who were "like any other British child".[7] Peter Neumann expressed a similar argument in his book: for many people, their attraction to ISIS became a result of a combination of adventurism and identity-seeking.[8] However, he does not develop this idea in depth. He also focuses on ISIS supporters' internal motivations rather than on the group's effort to convince people that being a member can be a suitable option for them. This theory differs from previously existing theories in the following aspects: (1) it emphasises that a brand (in this case, ISIS) can artificially create a desire to make a spontaneous choice in favour of a certain experience (or product) that is advertised as exciting; (2) it highlights the state of self-illusion that accompanies the feeling of excitement; and (3) it shows what measures can be taken by a terrorist group to prevent disillusionment and disengagement by its recruits due to its outrageous acts of violence.

The last point is particularly important as it represents a paradox. According to Max Abrahms, ISIS's brutality turned away many Muslims who may have shared some of their beliefs (e.g. the creation of the Caliphate).[9] Nevertheless, several thousands of others were not scared by those acts of violence, and it would be safe to say that most of these people were not ruthless psychopaths who enjoyed violence. As I have been trying to emphasise throughout the book, the choice made emotionally has a spontaneous nature; it is a vivid example of affect that international relations scholars currently talk about. The decision happens suddenly without considerations of pro and cons; it resembles an instinct in its mechanics. What it also means is that decision made in such a way may further results in people feeling regretful, disappointed and anxious. This consequently may result in breaking the connection with the brand and thus disengagement. Brands, naturally, would prefer to avoid these situations. As mentioned before, they can create justifications for their customers through rationalisation, that is, bringing them into the state of "guiltless hedonism" where customers would be able to enjoy brand's products and being part of its community without negative feelings.

Indeed, ISIS offers its recruits seemingly logical justifications. They are used to avoid negative feelings of guilt, anxiety and regret that ISIS followers can feel once they join the group, realising that the attractive image it projects is not real. Here, ISIS uses several tools. It avoids presenting itself in a negative light, shifting the blame on to someone else, presenting its actions as justified, and avoiding responsibility for one's actions. The first tool is linked to positive images that ISIS offered to its recruits. The group aimed to convince its recruits that: (a) whatever it is doing, it is doing for a good reason and (b) its followers would become new and better people and, to remain so, they

need to obey ISIS's orders. For example, the group argues that fighting against "infidels" is not only allowed, as their lives are less important than those of true Muslims but is also an obligation for every true Muslim. It also particularly stresses the fact that members of ISIS are special, chosen by God, that they are better than others. Other tools are used more widely, both to keep its emotionally driven followers and those followers who had specific reasons to join. It presents itself as a politically and religiously legitimate actor whose actions are not motivated by the desire to kill, but by the aggression of its "enemies" (the West, Muslims who do not support ISIS). It also allows its followers to avoid guilt by stressing the importance of following the imam's orders. This means that ISIS followers are presented as being removed from the decision-making process and thus not responsible for everything bad done by it. All these tools together create a state of so-called "guiltless hedonism" that allows ISIS followers to continue to enjoy their new identities without having doubts about the consequences.

There is an important question to be answered about the motivation for emotion-driven choice. If ISIS creates such attractive and seemingly easy-to-achieve images, why do not all young Muslims join the group? Brand's advertising, once seen by a customer, becomes part of their mediated experiences, and the use of the brand's products becomes part of their lived experiences. In constructing their identities, customers draw *selectively* on brands' offering.[10] Therefore, the degree of a symbolic meaning they give to a brand depends on how much they need from that brand to express themselves. Some (and in the case of ISIS, the majority) would not find the brand's advertising relevant to their personal experiences and would ignore it. Some would prefer a different brand because it looks much more attractive (and "Muslim cool" is offering young people more and more opportunities to express themselves through variety of ways). Some people who initially become attracted to a brand will watch its advertising, like it and spread the word about it but never actually buy its product. Similarly, some of the followers of ISIS would be satisfied by sharing pictures of ISIS on the Internet and calling the West "*kuffar*". Some customers would admire a brand but find its product too expensive, so they will find cheaper alternatives. Some ISIS followers would want to grow a beard or wear a niqab and start recruiting others, but they never make the next step, while others would feel that only the full experience with the brand, that is, engaging with violence, would satisfy their motivation for self-symbolism and social symbolism. This idea is in line with an argument made by Gilbert Ramsay, who conducted comprehensive research of jihadi online communities. He concluded that not all "online mujahideen" are inclined to move further to violent actions. The majority of them are satisfied with playing the role of a jihadist online, and this seems enough for them to satisfy the needs for self-expression and self-actualisation.[11]

What can the example of ISIS and marketing tell us in a broader context of terrorism/critical terrorism studies? First, one of the main arguments that I was trying to highlight throughout this book is that it, of course, terrorism is

a big threat to society and often results in tragedy. However, what terrorism is *not* a mysterious unexplainable force or a demonic act as it is often presented in the media and in public discourse even among professional politicians. The case of ISIS was very illustrative in this sense: in the early years of its existence, the group was presented as almost possessing supernatural powers to lure and charm people into abandoning their homes and families and join their fight in Syria. As I was trying to show here, "the magic of ISIS" is simple marketing, which we all tend to fall for at times. The ideas that group was promoting among their young supporters were not primarily based on violence and killings but rather on self-improvement, excitement and pleasure of becoming a better version of oneself – "cool", strong and special. Essentially, people (at least, younger people) might end up in a terrorist/extremist group in the same way as many people end up in being part of an emo or a punk community. Unlike the commonly accepted argument about particular strategic/rational reasons that recruits have, they could also be motivated purely by emotional, hedonistic desires. What it means, on a larger scale, is that in theory, any person can potentially be attracted to a radical group as long as this group knows how to sell its ideas well. Consequently, it means that the idea that there are people who are more likely to engage in terrorism may not be entirely true. As I showed in this book, some part of terrorist propaganda is aimed to spark an instinct in you, make you decide spontaneously and without long and detailed reasoning. Therefore, the concept of radicalisation, which is based on the idea of a person going through a gradual process of beliefs and views change, does not account for it. Moreover, it seems to be encouraging harmful practices of monitoring of society and searching for potential suspects. One of the vivid examples of it is UK's Contest strategy, with its Prevent section aimed at early identification and decontamination of potential terrorists. David Omand, a former UK Security and Intelligence Coordinator and Permanent Secretary, characterised it as "effective" and advocated for the internationalisation of the UK's approach to develop a better strategy to counter international terrorism.[12] Omand emphasised that years of experience with countering terrorism in Northern Ireland taught the UK a very good lesson and allowed it to transfer its knowledge to other types of terrorism.[13] Oppositely, other researchers claimed that the strategy has fundamental flaws that may not only be ineffective in achieving the strategy's goal but actually be detrimental to it.[14] One of the reasons for this, which has been also demonstrated in this book, is the creation of the "radicalisation" discourse and its application almost uniquely to Britain's Muslim population, framing them as terrorists.[15] As demonstrated, this problem has been actively exploited by ISIS, which built a significant part of its rhetoric around it.

The sad truth is terrorism does happen and will continue happening whether we try to identify potential perpetrators or not and the best thing is to accept it. Of course, I do not suggest that we should ignore the threat and do nothing about it; however, it may worth reconsidering our approach to it.

Namely I would agree with the argument that both Richard English and Steve Hewitt[16] (as well as other researchers) made that it is important to stop exceptionalising and demonising the threat posed by ISIS, its supporters and terrorism in general. While this group, undeniably, brought a lot of damage to the West and the Middle East, it nevertheless consists of people who used to live a normal life like any other person, and who are also very young. As demonstrated here, these young people's path to terrorism is no different to their path to any other youth subculture. By stressing how dangerous and deadly ISIS is, governments only reinforced the group's narrative of its supporters being special, chosen and "against the hostile world". Such an approach would only confirm ISIS's arguments about how powerful and invincible its followers are and how they are still able to inflict fear on the West, even after the group's losses in Syria. Instead, it seems to be more beneficial to stress that "normality" of young ISIS supporters and treat them as ordinary criminals (who potentially could come back to normal life) rather than as evil villains. Here, the review of Shamima Begum, Jack Letts and other young people's cases could be a useful step in this direction. These young people were presented as so dangerous to the state that the government was afraid to even keep them in custody on its territory. A similar way of thinking can work with other types of terrorism as well. For example, a leader of one group that has recently been designated terrorist told me that even though it did result in certain negative consequences for them, at the same time it attracted as much attention to them as it never has before. This means that the "terrorist" discourse may now actually help people who are called so and serve as a way of "branding" themselves rather than detain them.

Coming back to the concept of radicalisation, I am by no means trying to discount the existing theories or prove them wrong. Rather I am trying to emphasise that first, there may be patterns that do not fall with the existing pattern and also that the practical use of this concept may not be effective. As shown, if a person makes a decision to affiliate themselves with a radical group instinctively, it is impossible to predict or prevent that. However, it is possible to detect and respond to propaganda that is attempting to trigger this decision. What can be done for creating a better response to brand-like propaganda of ISIS and its successors?

While countering ISIS many governments were trying to construct its message uniquely around the idea of debunking myths about the righteousness of the group. While this approach might be helpful, it may need further elaboration. I have shown that ISIS in its propaganda did not focus that much on the "negatives". Yes, it did criticise the West and called for violence, but the main "product" it was offering was something attractive and exciting, an idea of becoming someone "cool", good and likeable. The takeaway from it is that counter-terrorism practitioner, similar to ISIS, needs to come up with a positive emotional message along with the rationality-based message. The West's communication strategy might attempt to adopt a similar line of behaviour and show the exciting side of it (e.g. career opportunities, social

opportunities, opportunities for adventure). While these attempts might have already been taken, officials also need to learn how to speak with youth in their language – this is something in what ISIS achieved perfection. It is not enough to simply declare how many opportunities there are in the UK or the United States or how great they are as countries and assume that this would distract all young people from ISIS. First, it is important to be creative and attempt to create the same type of an emotional bond with the audiences as ISIS did. The technique of narrative advertising can help with it. In addition, it is necessary to invest in the work of people who are familiar with the community (and will thus be trusted by them) and who can produce content and messages that resonate among the younger audience. For example, if it is Muslim community, simply asking any "moderate" cleric to address the audience and explain that groups like ISIS do not represent real Islam may not help. One reason for this is that, as I said, ISIS is quite meticulous in using religious writings to corroborate their argument (yes, they are used out of the context, yet they are not distorted), and thus to those people at whom this message is addressed often do consider them as "true believers". At the same time, as I was arguing throughout this book, a significant part of the ISIS propaganda is built around narratives concerning identity and self-image, offering likeable and exciting ways of living and behaviour. Bearing in mind that a lot of young Muslims find clerics boring, irrelevant and unapproachable, and prefer to use YouTube channels instead, it would make sense finding alternative figures for collaboration.[17] For example, Muslim bloggers (many of whom actually do try to argue with jihadist narratives) may be a much more promising alternative.[18] Providing them with more platform to speak and supporting their projects may give much better results as they are closer to younger audience in their style, topics and interests than "official" clerics or government officials.

As mentioned before, "jihadi cool" has become a sort of subculture within subculture of "Muslim cool". Like with any other subculture, its existence and viability are, on the one hand, dependant on what is fashionable, attractive and fun – and at the same time different, unique and even rebellious. As I said, a brand promotes images that would appeal to people's social symbolism, that is, satisfy their desire to be liked and accepted in their community. With the increased visibility of "Muslim cool" and the great variety of its expression, the support and development of this trend may become of great help in diverting young people from jihadism. One way of doing it is to further appeal to young and popular Muslim bloggers to express their opinions on the matter, making emphasis not on the fact that jihadism is "morally wrong", but that is simply not "cool". It may sound comical, yet ISIS did exactly that to attract people and it worked. So why then we are thinking that dry and boring lectures of politicians may compete with the fun and excitement of ISIS brand? Oppositely, social media users and bloggers can indeed promote the same idea in the style that would be received with much more trust and interest.

The next point sounds almost strange to raise because there has been so much said about it. Yet, there is still a lot of work to be done. It is important to raise awareness of other people about Islam and its "real" face. While in the West Muslim and non-Muslim communities live side by side, it was demonstrated that a lot of non-Muslim people have very little knowledge about Islam, Muslim way of life and most importantly the differences between various groups.[19] Moreover, as Steve Hewitt demonstrates, there is a tendency to equate Islam and jihadist terrorism, which has proven to be a very damaging practice.[20] This causes stereotyping and hostility to be further reinforced, not only in live interactions but through media and social media, which gives ISIS additional leverage. One of the ways to solve this problem is to use pop culture, for example, films, TV programmes, popularisation of Islamic artists and musicians, without the usual discourse of exoticism typical for a Western-produced piece of culture about Muslims.[21] It would also be particularly beneficial to invest into the development of "Muslim cool" – such as concerts, talks, exhibitions of young Muslim artists and influencers – which can help young people find other options available for self-expression than jihadism.

All points I have just discussed are related to the field of terrorism/critical terrorism studies. There is, however, something to be added into a larger field of international relations. While as I mentioned in the introduction, emotions and manipulation with people's feelings were proven as an effective tool to achieve political goals. Namely, fear, anger and frustration have always been an effective tool for mobilisation, and sympathy is often used by politicians to gain additional points during public campaigns. It has also been proven that emotional narratives built around identity issues (e.g. attack on "us" from the "enemy") are often used by social movement to consolidate their members and audiences.[22] What this book showed is that a identity narratives based on excitement and hedonism help form an emotional connection between an actor and its audience. An actor is perceived as caring and understanding, capable of satisfying audience's desires and resolving their concerns – as if it represents them. It explains why even clearly flawed and weak arguments/ideas that do not have any logical or rational can still resonate and find a wide circle of supporters. A message built around positive emotions makes people more susceptible to its message, even if it is weak and be more willing to commit themselves to the actor's cause. Digital media represent a perfect tool and at the same time, perfect environment for exploiting this technique. The speed with which information is spreading on social media can only be compared with the speed with which new tools and technologies to attract new followers and keep the audience engaged emerge. The popularity of such platforms as TikTok where a simple video can go viral suggests that in the future mobilisation processes may rely much less on the message itself (i.e. ideology) and more on visual effects and knowledge of marketing mechanisms and tools for growing and engaging with the audience. This means that, on the one hand, the audience is becoming more demanding and sophisticated when it comes

to the dissemination of a particular message as they constantly require actors to perfect and further develop their marketing techniques. At the same time, it appears that affect, specifically digital affect, may become more prominent in people's decision-making and the time gap between the birth of a particular piece of content, its contact with the audience and their reaction to it would become more and more narrow.

This book focused specifically on ISIS and most of the conclusions I made here were connected to the case of ISIS or jihadist terrorism.[23] However, as I said, the observations I made here can also be found among far-right groups. Research in this area shows that groups like Proud Boys, Atomwaffen Division, Russian Imperial Movement and many others seem to use the same types of techniques. Research highlights how many far-right male recruits name their desire to feel more masculine as one of the reasons to join these groups. In their propaganda, indeed, one can notice references that resemble ISIS's rhetoric – calls to become a hero, who "saves" and "defends" their country from "threats", an idea of being "chosen" by a certain divine entity for a mission, secretive nature of the organisation that resembles a secret (i.e. elitist) society.[24] For example, Russian Imperial Movement refers to its members as "soldiers of Christ" and emphasises how only "special" (i.e. morally superior) people can join it.[25] Similarly, women look for an opportunity to guard their femininity and find love yet with an ability to make political change.[26] Research also shows that far-right groups similarly use elements of cool in their propaganda – that is, memes, jokes, creation of merchandise and reference to pop culture.[27]

This means that the model of emotional choice can also be applied to analyse and understand the dynamics of these group's propaganda and recruitment and find ways if not to stop it but at least decrease its scale. It is probably time now for us to understand that we will never be able to combat terrorism completely or even "win hearts and minds" as it is always suggested. There will always be people who are susceptible to the message of radicals and as I showed here, these people may be closer to us than we think. However, what we can do is to understand why and how radical messages work and at the very least make sure that our message is no less "cool" as the one of terrorists.

Notes

1 Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy and Pervan, *Strategic Brand Management*, 31.
2 See Aida Arosaiae, 'In the Name of Honor and Freedom: The Sacred as Justifying Tool for ISIS' and Secular Violence', *Culture and Religion* 18, no. 3 (2017): 278–295; Amin Saikal, 'How Islamic Has the 'Islamic State' Been?' *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 38, no. 2, 143–152.
3 Winter, 'Virtual Caliphate': 8; Cristina Archetti, 'Terrorism, Communication and New Media: Explaining Radicalization in the Digital Age': 49.
4 See Meeus, 'Why Do Young People Become Jihadists?'; Hakim and Mujahidah, 'Social Context, Interpersonal Network, and Identity Dynamics'; Chassman, 'Islamic State, Identity, and the Global Jihadist Movement'.

5 See Sardarnia and Safizadeh, 'The Internet and Its Potentials for Networking and Identity Seeking'; Westphal, 'Violence in the Name of God?'; Chassman, 'Islamic State, Identity, and the Global Jihadist Movement'; Ingram, 'An Analysis of Islamic State's *Dabiq* Magazine'; Ingram, 'The Strategic Logic of Islamic State Information Operations'.
6 See Stern and Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*.
7 'Radicalisations: 'Transformation Was Quite Astonishing', *BBC News*, 3 July 2015, www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-32987465/radicalisations-transformation-was-quite-astonishing.
8 Neumann, *Radicalized*, 56.
9 Abrahms, *Rules for Rebels*, 194.
10 Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy and Pervan, *Strategic Brand Management,* 57.
11 Ramsay, *Jihadi Culture on the World Wide Web*, 133.
12 David Omand, 'Countering International Terrorism: The Use of Strategy', *Survival* 47, no. 4 (2005): 112.
13 Omand, 'Countering International Terrorism': 109.
14 See Dudenhoefer, 'Resisting Radicalisation: A Critical Analysis of the UK Prevent Duty'; Bentley, 'Enough is Enough: The UK Prevent Strategy and Normative Invalidation'; Raffaello Pantucci, 'A Contest to Democracy? How the UK Has Responded to the Current Terrorist Threat', *Democratization* 17, no. 2 (2010): 251–271; John Gearson and Hugo Rosemont, 'CONTEST as Strategy: Reassessing Britain's Counterterrorism Approach', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 12 (2015): 1038–1064; Joel David Taylor, ' "Suspect Categories," Alienation and Counterterrorism: Critically Assessing PREVENT in the UK', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (2018): 1–23.
15 See Charlotte Heath-Kelly, 'Counter-Terrorism and the Counterfactual: Producing the "Radicalisation" Discourse and the UK PREVENT Strategy', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 15, no. 3 (2012): 394–415; Anthony Richards, 'The Problem with "Radicalization": The Remit of "Prevent" and the Need to Refocus on Terrorism in the UK', *International Affairs* 87, no. 1(2011): 143–152; Bentley, 'Enough Is Enough: The UK Prevent Strategy and Normative Invalidation'; Imran Awan, 'I Am a Muslim Not an Extremist': How the Prevent Strategy Has Constructed a "Suspect" Community', *Politics & Policy* 40, no. 6 (2012): 1158–1185.
16 English, *Terrorism: How to Respond*, 28–37; Hewitt, *The British War on Terror*, 123.
17 Hussein Kesvani*, Follow Me Akhi: The Online World of British Muslims* (London: Hurst & Company, 2019), 11.
18 Hussein Kesvani*, Follow Me Akhi: The Online World of British Muslims* (London: Hurst&Co, 2019), 17.
19 Elizabeth Pool, *Reporting Islam. Media Representations of British Muslims* (London: I.B. Taurus Publishers, 2002), 240.
20 Hewitt, 'Three Lessons': 9.
21 One of many examples of this was a Channel 4 film, *My Week as a Muslim*, in which a white woman wore a burqa to recreate everyday experiences of Muslim women. The film met with severe criticism for 'brownfacing'.

Source: Adam Lusher, 'My Week as a Muslim: Channel 4 Prompts Anger and Mockery after 'Blacking up' White Woman to Show Islamophobia', *Independent*, 24 October 2017, accessed 17 April 2020, www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/my-week-as-a-muslim-channel-4-documentary-black-up-brownface-row-white-woman-islamophobia-racism-a8016911.html.

22 Examples of radicalization mechanisms can be found in McCauley and Moskalenko, 'Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism'.
23 Mina al-Lami, 'How Boko Haram Is Ripping off Islamic State's Branding', *BBC Monitoring*, 14 November 2018, accessed 9 March 2020, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c200exu9.
24 Julia Ebner, *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2021); Michael Kimmel, *Healing From Hate*; Anna Kruglova, 'For God, for Tsar and for the Nation: Authenticity in the Russian Imperial Movement's Propaganda', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2021): 1–24; Betty A. Dobratz, 'The Role of Religion in the Collective Identity of the White Racialist Movement', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 40 no.2 (2001): 287–301; Tammy Castle, Lars Kristiansen and Lantz Shifflett, 'White Racial Activism and Paper Terrorism: A Case Study in Far-Right Propaganda', *Deviant Behavior* 41, no. 2 (2020): 252–267.
25 Anna Kruglova, 'For God, for Tsar and for the Nation': 12–13.
26 Julia Ebner, *Going Dark: The Secret Social Lives of Extremists* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019): 53–75.
27 Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *The Extreme Gone Mainstream*; Julia R. DeCook, 'Memes and Symbolic Violence'; Edwin Hodge and Helga Hallgrimsdottir, 'Networks of Hate: The Altright, "Troll Culture", and the Cultural Geography of Social Movement Spaces Online,'; Phillipp Karl, 'Creating a New Normal: The Mainstreaming of Far-Right Ideas through Online and Offline Action in Hungary', in *Post Digital Cultures of the Far-Right: Online Actions and Offline Consequences in Europe and the US,* eds. Maik Fielitz and Nick Thurston (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2019), 67–78.

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